Care of the Carte Blanche Family

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Care of the Carte Blanche Family

by onetiredboy

Summary

Care of the Carte Blanche Family is a collection of 15 oneshots exploring the 15 different dynamics of the members of the Carte Blanche. Ever wanted to see Vespa and Rita go on a trip to the markets to pick up supplies? Buddy help Juno practise his one-eyed sharpshooting? Peter get read to shreds by literally every other member of the crew except Juno? Rita and Juno having a ladies' day at the spa? Then Care of the Carte Blanche Family Is For You!

Written as part of the 2019/20 Penumbra Minibang.

Notes

Hi guys! Sorry for the long note... I'm a little excited.

Welcome to Care of the Carte Blanche Family. This fic is a series of 15 oneshots exploring the 15 relationship dynamics possible with our beloved Aurinko crime family crew. This was my first time participating in a fandom event and I am really thankful for the experience. I had a lot of fun and I worked really hard, and I hope it shows!

Chapters will be uploaded on a 2-day-on, 1-day-off basis, at ~9AM EST, across the posting period of 10th-31st May. They're not interlinked and not necessarily in order chronologically, (you can kind of think of these scenes as hypothetical if you like) so feel free to read them in any order, though I hope you give all chapters a try!!! Please comment to tell me what you think of the chapters or what dynamic you're most excited for!

Now for a final note: thank you endlessly to the bangfic mods who put this event together, and thank you so much to my artists. I really enjoyed getting to know them both and really appreciated the enthusiasm they showed for my idea.

To Wolfy: thank you for always getting excited over new chapters! I'll never get over how cool it is that we met irl basically by coincidence 2 days before we realised we were assigned to each other.

To Sarcasm: thank you for your enthusiasm too!! I've loved theorising with you every time new eps come out and the fun conversations we have, not to mention your art!

I cannot wait to read everybody else's fics because I know how hard everyone worked and getting to read the others is gonna be the best part of this >:}

Anyway, onwards with the fic!

In this chapter, Vespa and Rita go for a trip to the marketplace. Vespa wants to keep it simple. Rita has... other ideas.

Vespa & Rita: Opposite Sides of the Colourwheel.

Buddy made you do this.

Resentment fills me like water in a cup, rising up and up until it hits the rim – just before the surface tension breaks, I realise what I'm thinking. I can't help a little gasp from punching out as the feeling drains out of me, leaving me hollow.

A part of hallucinations that will never get easier with time is when little voices tell you awful things about the people you love, and you don't have a choice but to believe them, even if only for a little.

Buddy didn't make me do this. Actually, Buddy tried to stop me. She knows market duty isn't good for me. Markets like this — people crawling the streets like brightly-coloured insects, crying out to be heard over the cacophony of stall-owners – are the perfect breeding ground for an assassin. And the perfect breeding ground for a broken assassin's paranoia.

But I asked. I need to do this— prove that I can do this, prove that there's something useful I can do onboard our ship. And anyway, I'm sick of telling Sequliak and Steel what products to buy and them *always* getting the wrong things. Ransom's better at following instructions, but since we got closer to Brahma he's gotten awfully twitchy about going outside the ship, and God forbid you mention it without getting his ladyfriend barking you down like a bodyguard. Anyway, Ransom and Steel are on probation from market duty after the last time — they disappeared for six hours and came back with a string of badly hidden hickeys a-piece and not a single grocery bag between them. *We got lost*, was Juno's excuse, before Ransom glanced at him and his eyes fell on the way Juno's shirt was falling away from his shoulder and said only, in a pathetic little voice, *Oh dear.*

But all of that's irrelevant, and the thing that's got stupid voices springing up in the back of my mind isn't the marketplace. A marketplace is manageable, by myself. But with Ransom and Steel banned and Jet and Buddy *too busy* to come with me, I've been saddled with—

"Oh my *God,* Miss Vespa, that gentleman's got a *whole* Uranian Pineapple on her head! Ain't it the greatest thing you've ever seen?"

—Rita. Who's asked me that exact same question about thirty different things so far. I'm starting to wonder if she has object permanence problems.

Look, I don't have a problem with Rita. She's good to have around, knows how to deal with Steel, has this horrible infectious kind of joy about her that gets to you right when you least want it to. Has some kind of freak pheromonal effect, or maybe it's just something about her puppy-dog eyes that make me feel like making her sad would be the cruelest out of the thousand cruel things I've done over my career.

But she's not good in a place like this. Especially not when you're *trying* to keep a low profile.

"Do you think she'll let me take a picture with her? *Hell-oooo*—Hey!"

I grab Rita's waving arm and push it back down by her side, "*Don't* draw attention to yourself."

"But that ain't no fun, Miss Vespa!" Rita whines, "What's the point of bein' on holiday if you ain't allowed to have fun?"

"We're *not* on *holiday,"* I grit out, releasing her wrist.

"Oh, I know," Rita says cheerily, smoothing down her skirt, "But it makes market duty a whole lot more fun to pretend it is. What's next on the list, Miss Vespa?"

Finally, back to focusing on what we're here for. Even looking at the list in my hands calms down some of the voices in the back of my head. I grimace, "Ransom got hold of this list again."

"How'd'you know?" Rita asks.

"Cause nobody else has such stupid over-the-top handwriting. Handwriting like this is exactly why cursive should have been banned," I squint at the infuriating scrawl, "Ankaran…f— This is face cream. He wants me to buy his face cream. These— are all face creams. How that self-absorbed, snivelling beanpole ever survived as a thief—"

"That ain't a nice way to talk!" Rita says sternly, "Miss Vespa. I know he's a lot to deal with, but it makes me so sad when I hear one of my family members talking about another one like that! If he wants us to pick up his products while we're here, well, that's fair enough. It'll be a while until we go grocery shoppin' again, after all."

Hysteria grips at the edges of my voice, “We’re *not* grocery shopping. We’re doing a market run! For supplies!”

Rita purses her lips, “…Face cream’s a kinda supply, ain’t it?”

I rub one hand over my face, then jerk it away again with a shallow gasp. The sensation of peeling skin lingers for a second, but soon crawls back into the place in my mind it came from.

“Miss Vespa?” Rita puts a hand on my elbow, “You alright?”

I breathe in and out again, “Just fine.”

“If you want I can go get Mistah Ransom’s products and meet you back here?” Rita offers.

“*No*,” not for the first time, I wish I had a leash. I grab her little hand and hold it tightly, trying to find a stall around here that’ll sell Ransom’s goddamn beauty products, “You stay with me, Rita. A marketplace is dangerous, even for someone who knows how they work. Any one of these people could be traffickers, debtors, muggers, assassins—”

“Well that ain’t a nice way to judge people,” Rita protests, “How are you possibly gonna tell if someone’s an assassin unless you talk to them?!”

For a second, the sounds of the marketplace are just… *so* loud. For once, it’s not what’s inside my head, but what’s outside it — the voices and shifting eyes, each pair appraising exactly how much every person they see would be worth on the black market and whether or not the trouble of drugging them is worth the creds.

When you enter a place like this, no matter how nice a planet you ended up in, whether you like it or not, you become part of what’s on the table. And I’m saddled up with someone who would probably slap a huge ‘FOR SALE’ sign on herself the moment the first stranger asked.

“Oh my God!” Rita shrieks me out of my sensory overload, “That person’s selling For Sale signs! Ain’t it the greatest thing you’ve ever seen?!”

Sometimes I feel like somebody orchestrates everything that happens in my life just to get a kick out of it. I resist the urge to glance around for cameras, resist the urge to just start crying, and pull Rita away from the stall she’s reaching out towards. I pull her through the

crowd, making enough turns to lose anybody whose attention we could have caught. Then I turn on her.

"Stop it," I hiss at her, grabbing on to her shoulders, "I don't know what you're trying, Rita, but whatever it is, just *stop it*!"

I'm meant to be intimidating. My voice shakes like I'm a scared little girl. A few heads closer to us turn and they're going to get us, get us, get us—

The sound of the marketplace rises until there's no room in my head for anything else.

"—tain Aurinko, as long as you think so. I don't wanna make any decisions without your input, is all."

I come back to myself in waves, sitting with my back against a tent. It's a dark little corner between two stalls, but one of the suns manages to get right in my eyes anyway. Rita's talking to someone, and then my gut lurches.

"Can I speak to her?"

Buddy's voice crackles through the bad comms reception. Just the sound of that voice, the disappointment ringing out in it, makes me feel like curling up here and never moving again. I feel so pathetic, so utterly consumed by my own embarrassment and shame. I shake my head at Rita when she looks at me.

"'Course, Captain A! She's right here," Rita says, and pushes the comms into my hands.

"Vespa," Buddy sighs out, "Oh, love. I'm so sorry. I never should have let you go on market duty, not without me or Jet with you."

It hurts. I scoff, "I'm not a patient, Bud. I don't need to be *escorted.*"

"That's—" the punch to Buddy's breath tells me I've hurt her back. It only hurts me more. "That's not what I meant to imply, love."

I'm hyperaware of Rita next to me. I can't have a conversation like this with Buddy with her here to overhear me. I lean back against the tent, swallow down my feelings, and say, "I'm sorry, *Captain*."

Buddy sighs hard into the comms. There's silence for a long time.

“You have nothing to be sorry for, Vespa,” there’s a more professional clip to her voice when she speaks again, which shouldn’t make my gut sink like it does when I know I’m the one who initiated it, “Do you think you can continue with the mission, or shall we arrange to have you both picked up?”

I look at Rita. She puts both her hands up. This decision is mine to make.

“I’m not giving up,” I grit into the comms. “We’ll be at the rendezvous at the previously discussed time.”

“Vespa—”

I hang up the call. Silently, I hold the comms back to Rita.

Neither of us says anything. I shift on the ground, feel the crunch and roll of the gravel under my boots when I adjust position.

“Miss Vespa, I gotta apologise,” Rita says at last.

“No, you don’t,” I start saying, but she cuts me off.

“I don’t care if you don’t wanna hear it. I gotta say it, cause when I do the wrong thing and don’t get a chance to fix it it really makes me upset. And then I feel too sick to eat my snacks and I ain’t cancelling on my challenge to see which one of us outta me and Mistah Steel can eat more bacon twists tonight, cause Mistah Ransom’s offerin’ up a hairclip of his I’ve had my eye on for a long time to the winner.”

My mouth twitches into a struggling attempt at a smile despite myself. Infectious.

“The thing is, I’m real used to Mistah Steel and the way he thinks and feels. And you two are more similar than either of you would *ever* admit—” she rushes the rest of her sentence before I can snap at her — “And don’t think about gettin’ angry and disagreein’ cause that only proves my point. But anyway, that don’t matter. What I’m sayin’ is, a lotta the time Mistah Steel used to tell me not to do things, especially when he was stressed. But usually I’d do them anyway. And he’d get all angry about it, but… it was kinda how we talked sometimes. Like, he didn’t have the words to tell me he needed a distraction from bein’ so sad and afraid all the time, so he’d tell me *not* to do helpful things, and I’d do them, and he’d get angry at me, but… he’d be just a little less sad and afraid inside.”

Rita twists her fingers together and taps her pink-painted thumbs against each other. Her face is drawn in concentration, lips pursed like she's thinking hard. Her skirt is twisted like she's been shifting in place for a long time.

"You seemed so frightened today, and I thought maybe if I pointed out all the nice things, it'd help you stop thinkin' about all the scary stuff!" she continues. "And I guess I kept thinkin' you were tellin' me why I shouldn't in the same way Mistah Steel tells me why I shouldn't do the things I do. Just to get it out of your system, you know? But I was wrong. And I shoulda listened better. I'm sorry I made you so upset, Miss Vespa."

I nod my head slowly. I don't really know what to do with her apology, to be honest. It's heartfelt and sweet, and I lost the ability to be either of those things a long time ago.

"Let's get the rest of the stuff on this list marked off," I say, and pull myself to my feet.

"Okay!" Rita says, and stands up. She doesn't look disheartened that I've ignored her apology. Maybe you get used to silences like these after a decade or two of being Steel's friend. It's not hard to imagine.

When we slip back out into the bustle of the marketplace, Rita holds on to my hand. Her big brown eyes still flicker around the sights and costumes and odd exhibits, but she doesn't say a word. I weave between a man in a neon orange jumpsuit and a woman in neon green lingerie, pulling Rita along behind me, and scour the stalls.

"Hey! Ain't that Mistah Ransom's cream thingy?" Rita asks.

It turns out it is. We stop there and I have to spend embarrassingly long deciphering his handwriting so I can tell the merchant exactly what creams I want. It would help if he was a little less picky — as far as I can read, this part reads '*Shirburnian flower moisturiser — note: not to be confused with Shirburnian flower moisturiser.*'

"Hey," Rita touches my elbow, "I'm just gonna check out the stuff they have one stall over, m'kay? I'll stay in your line'a sight, and I'll yell out if anything happens."

I glance her up and down, from frilly-pink-scrunchie head to frilly-cat-sock toe, and then glance over at the neighbouring stall. "Okay."

Rita grins and moves away from my side. I keep an eye on her when

she weaves through some straggling members of the crowd at the stall's entrance.

I end up buying a bunch of different creams — hell, I'll use what Ransom doesn't, or use it on Bud, or pander it off to Jet. Rita appears back at my side just as I turn away from the stall.

"We're all done, right, Miss Vespa?" Rita chirps.

"Yeah. That's everything. Let's start heading back towards the rendezvous point."

"But, Miss Vespa, we've got twenty minutes until the crew meets us there!"

"And the longer we keep them waiting, the more danger we put the rest of our crew in," I counter, and twist my arm through hers as we push back into the throng of the crowd again.

Rita keeps shifting her hand in one of her skirt pockets, clearly picking up something — maybe somethings — at the bottom and twisting them around in her hands. It isn't like Rita to keep her mouth shut about something she's so invested in.

"What'd you buy?" I ask, as we swim upstream through the press of elaborately decorated bodies.

"Gimmie your hand," Rita stops walking and grabs my wrist. The crowd parts around us with no more than the usual burble, like a stream parting around a rock. Rita reaches one hand into her skirt pocket and brings out a piece of string. Or, no, it's not string. It's made of a hot pink fibre, something obviously high-quality but no wider than any common string. Its middle is weighed down by a pendant; a tear-drop shaped pink crystal.

Rita brings the two ends of the string around my wrist and ties a slipknot, tightening it so it's the proper length for my wrist.

"What is this?" I ask.

"It's a friendship bracelet, silly! I got us ones matchin' in our colours. See?" Rita shows me her opposite wrist, around which is an identical string and identical pendant in bright green.

"My Mom and my Aunt and I used to make these for each other all the time. It's hard sometimes, to remember that someone cares about'cha

when you ain't there beside 'em all the time, you know? I used to struggle with that as a kid. So my Aunt made me one of these, so that every time I looked at it, I'd remember she at least cared about me enough to put the work in to creatin' somethin' just for me. Well. I ain't got time to make anything, but the sentiment's the same, alright?"

Something clicks in my mind. "That woven blue thing Steel wears on his left wrist—" I've seen him fiddling with it during family meetings. It's tattered and stained, but he never takes it off.

"One of mine! I got a matchin' one, too!" Rita moves the scrunchie on her wrist to show the matching blue braid.

Huh. I'd always assumed it was a religious thing.

"I'm gonna make one for everyone, I think," Rita chatters cheerily. She pats my wrist, takes my arm again, and we begin walking back through the bustling crowd. "Mistah Ransom's can be green like yours — but a deeper one, yanno? With a bit of blue. Like, *ocean green.* Don't that suit him? And I can put Jet's on my left ankle and Buddy's on my right ankle and Ransom's on my left arm and yours on my right and — oh *no* that leaves no space for Juno. *Well.* I'm sure he won't mind if I put him on the same arm as *Ransom."*

I only realise that I'm being led when the smell of hot, sweet food starts to drift in from over the tops of some tents to our side.

"This isn't the rendezvous point," I say, dumbly. Stupid, stupid Vespa — if this is a plot of some point, a ploy, the stupidest thing I could do is admit to knowing something's wrong.

"We got ten more minutes still! And it ain't far from here," Rita turns the corner and throws out her hands, "Ta-da!"

In front of us is a food stall. Behind the white, table-clothed bench, upon which is a cryptosafe, a comms cred transfer machine, and a small display case of bakery goods, stands a bewildered-looking employee. Behind the employee is a large fridge.

The words on the top of the stall say *Isopogan Ice Cream.*

"What do you think, Miss Vespa?" Rita whispers conspiratorially, at just a little lower than a shout, "Do we have time?"

“You’re going *down,* Steel.”

Steel glares up at me between one bacon-y mouthful and the next. From a dietitian’s point of view, I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything more disgusting in my life than two adults stuff their faces full with the kind of garbage that’s banned in several planets in Sol, much less do it for *money*.

Rita’s fingers are brown-dusted from the speed at which she’s popping small bacon twists into her mouth, chewing them down and throwing the next in before she’s even swallowed the first. But Juno’s mouth is bigger, and he’s still edging ahead.

Ransom’s hairclip sits in the middle of the table between us all.

“That’s it, love,” Ransom leans in close to Juno, apparently in direct competition to my taunts, “Keep going. You’re doing so well.”

Juno chokes on his bacon twists. He glares weakly up at Ransom with watery eyes as he recovers.

“Oops,” Ransom says.

“Faster, Rita, come on! Do you want this hairclip, or not?” I slam my fists down in front of Rita’s bowl of bacon twists, earning me a disapproving look from Ransom.

Rita stops with her hand halfway to her mouth and says, “I’m tryin, I’m tryin! Jeez! It ain’t helpin’ matters I got little hands — Mistah Steel can pick up twice as many twists as I can in one go! I should be given some kinda boost at the start! It’s just like in *Slaves of Belleville* when—”

“Done!” Juno throws both fists in the air and gasps for breath. “Oh my God, finally, I’m done,” He collapses over the bench and groans. “I don’t think I could look at another bacon twisty ever again. I’m gonna be sick.”

“Well!” Ransom says, pleased. He picks his hairclip up from the bench, “I believe this means I’ll be taking back my—”

I draw my knife, “I believe what it *means* is that if you don’t want to wake up with considerably less hair tomorrow morning, Peter Ransom, you’ll forfeit Juno and your win.”

Ransom blinks at me, “*Excuse* me? This is hardly fair play. I’m sure

Rita wouldn't approve of these brutish tactics. Right, Miss Rita?"

He's using his nicest flattery voice. I glance at Rita over my shoulder. Rita purses her lips. "Well. It is a real nice hairclip, Mistah Ransom."

"*Un*-believable. You're teaming up against us! Juno—?" Ransom appeals, exasperated.

A comatose groan is all Ransom gets back from his ladylove. Eating a large bowl of bacon twisties that fast will do that to you.

Ransom tsks his tongue and sighs. "Fine. You win. Why you wanted to bet in the first place, if you planned on resorting to *threat* to win anyway…"

"Yes!" Rita launches across the kitchen island, almost falling entirely off the other side in her eagerness to snatch the hairclip out of Ransom's outstretched hand.

Ransom's mouth twists into something almost a little sulky, "You know, I'm not sure I'm a fan of this new partnership forming between the two of you."

"Well you better get *used* to it!" Rita crows.

"You want me to look after your boyfriend?" I tip my head towards where Juno lies across the counter, bacon dust caught in the stubble around his mouth.

Ransom sighs, "No, no, medical attention won't be required. I think perhaps a nice bath is in order, though."

"Alright. Then I'm outta here," I say, and turn to walk out of the room.

But I don't leave before taking up Rita's offer for a high-five, the little green pendant on her wrist and the pink one on mine touching for just a moment before I walk away.

Jet & Juno: Testdrive.

Chapter Summary

> In which there's only one person Jet trusts with the Ruby 7, and it sure as hell isn't Peter Ransom.
>
> TWs can be found in the end notes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It is a shuffling sound of footsteps that has me look up from the hood of the Ruby.

Juno hovers around the door. His body language is tense, a little insecure. I see this side of him often, often watch him catch himself and release some of the tension in his shoulders only for it to seep back in again over a period of some minutes. His hands are shoved into the pockets of his dark trucker's jacket, the thick synthetic lining poking out of the overturned collar. If my observations of his behaviour are true, this is usually indicative of a Juno Steel who has not slept well the night before. Any frustration I have, I push aside — it is not his fault if he cannot sleep. I find myself unable to do so often.

"Juno. Thank you for being on time," I say. "The Ruby Seven will be ready momentarily."

"Cool. Sweet," Juno walks over to my side. I glance at his heavy boots, the laces of which are undone.

"Make sure those are clean," I mutter, and then turn back to the engine.

"Yeah, I don't actually make a habit of keeping my things filthy, thanks," Juno grumbles, but in my peripheral vision I see him sit down on a crate and glance at the bottoms of his shoes. Good.

There is nothing overly wrong with the Ruby. Not on a mechanical level, in any case. I have recently been performing experiments, of a kind, both on the car and of myself. The end result of these experiments is often the same: I find myself examining the engine in an attempt to find a signature of any kind on one of its complicated parts.

A mechanic though I may be, many of the Ruby's inner workings are too obviously sophisticated for me to attempt to fiddle with, which hinders my ability to search somewhat. And yet I search anyway, pouring over each of the visible parts in order to find some mark suddenly there.

But there is none, and this is merely distraction. I lean back from the engine and close the hood.

"Are you ready to go?" I ask Juno.

Juno is on his comms, smiling at his screen. "Yeah, just a sec," he says, and starts typing back.

"Juno."

"I said just a—"

"We do not have time for you to type out a whole message."

Juno's smile drops from his face. He looks up at me. "I… Oh. Uh. Sorry," he locks his comms, and slips them back into his jacket pocket.

"My apologies. I did not mean to offend."

"No, you— don't worry about it," Juno says. He folds his scarred hands together. Then he shakes his head, and stands up from the crate, "Alright, Big Guy, what's the deal? Is there some kind of ritual I have to take? Does the car have to taste my blood before I can drive it?"

Juno Steel is a person who often confuses me. He has a habit of saying things seemingly out of nowhere, which is either the product of a vivid imagination, or stupidity. I have yet to decide which. "No," I say, a little slowly, to make sure it sinks in. "I have a theory that may explain some of the Ruby's odd behaviour. I believe the car works almost like an algorithm, measuring the positive human response to decisions it makes and changing its behaviour to further promote that positive response. In order to test this theory, I must have someone else drive it to measure the change in the car's behaviour."

"Yeah. I know, Big Guy, you explained all of this to me this morning. I might've looked dead but my hearing still worked alright. But I'm gonna ask you the same question now as I did then— why *me*, exactly? I've been told I drive like a grandma on 'roids."

“Exactly.”

“Okay. You know, just because I make a self-deprecating joke doesn’t suddenly give you permission to agree—”

“Buddy does not have time to participate,” I explain, “and I wouldn’t ask our ship’s captain to take time out of her day to solve an idle curiosity. Vespa is easily frustrated, and I fear she may lack… the concentration necessary. Rita would likely crash the car. You are familiar with the Ruby’s behaviour, and I trust you would not cause it harm. You are the only option.”

Juno’s eyes flicker away from my face, “Well… what about—”

I turn away from Juno and walk towards the car. “The Thief does not touch the Ruby.”

“It was just a scratch!” Juno whines, following hot on my heels, “I was there when it happened, really, if you wanna see someone who can *really* drive a car, Ransom’s your best bet, he drove it like it was made for him—”

I thump my fist on the top of the car. Ruby beeps back at me.

“O—kay. Bad wording, alright,” Juno steps back when I turn around to face him.

“You agreed to go ahead with this. If you would like to step down from participating, I can test my theory another time.”

Juno looks away from me. The tension in his shoulders slumps out of him. For a moment, he’s quiet, with his eyebrows drawn low and frown lines deep on his forehead. He’s standing close enough that I can see more of the top of his head than his face.

Juno sighs, and hangs his head. He kicks at the ground with one boot. “No. It’s alright, I’ll… stop complaining. Sorry, Big Guy.”

As demonstrated several times so far in this conversation alone, Juno calls me this often. In fact, it is almost all he calls me. “You may call me Jet,” I inform him. “We reached a first name basis some time ago.”

Juno tips his neck back to look at me full on. A small smile quirks at the corner of his mouth, “I hope not. That’d take all the fun out of the nickname.”

He steps back from me and circles the car to its other side. Ruby pops the door open for him when his hand gets close to the handle, and he stops, his eyebrows hiking. “Huh. And they say chivalry is cryogenically frozen.”

The door on my side pops open as well. I get into the car, and Juno follows. The seat automatically adjusts to pull him forwards, which makes him yelp. “This car freaks me out,” Juno murmurs. His hands alight on the steering wheel almost too slowly, and take some time to find a comfortable grip.

“Do you know how to start the car?” I ask.

“I probably just tell it, right? Like… Open sesame. Or, 'wake the fuck up'.”

The car rumbles to life with a few short beeps. Juno blinks. “Huh. Did not… expect that to work.”

“Please do not swear at the car,” I request, and then reach up for a small remote on the dash, “I am initiating procedures to open the airlock. We will take a few laps around an asteroid two clicks north the Carte Blanche, and then return to the ship.”

“Yeah, okay,” Juno mumbles. He takes a deep breath.

I preoccupy myself with opening the airlock — it’s an automated system but it does take some concentration to ensure all processes go well. A malfunctioning airlock is never a good thing. It, however, opens without a hitch.

“We are ready to leave now,” I inform Juno.

“Yeah, Big Guy, I see that,” he mumbles. Ruby hovers off the ground, and Juno presses the accelerator.

The Ruby jolts forwards with a growl from the engine, and Juno swears and takes his foot off the pedal, “This thing has a lot more juice than my old car…”

“Naturally. The Ruby Seven is highly more advanced than the car you had on Mars.”

“I know,” Juno grits out.

Juno Steel seems to have a habit of saying things he already knows.

He adjusts his grip on the steering wheel again, drives us out of the airlock much more smoothly. The Ruby whistles a questioning sound.

“What does that mean?” Juno asks nervously, without taking his eyes off the windshield.

“I believe the Ruby is attempting to gauge your reaction,” I take out my comms and begin writing down some notes.

“Uhh… okay? Well, this is good. Good car,” he says.

Ruby makes a chittering sound. Her lights flash a few times.

“Please do not flatter the car,” I say, without looking up.

Juno shifts in his seat and begins driving again. The Ruby is much slower this time, crawling outwards from the airlock. I glance up.

“You may drive normally.”

“Yeah, I *know,* I’m trying,” Juno mumbles. The car begins to glide forwards. “I… I’m pressing the pedal all the way down.”

I lean back in my seat and glance at the pedals. Juno is indeed almost flat footed on the floor of the car. “Very interesting. Ruby seems to have picked up on your hesitance—”

“This is so embarrassing,” Juno mumbles.

“—and has now changed the maximum speed of the car in order not to push you from your comfort zone.”

“Is that enough evidence?” Juno asks. His voice is tight, “This kind of sucks.”

“I would like to attempt some manoeuvres. Keep the controls manual, and drive us to the asteroid I mentioned earlier.”

As we move, the Ruby must sense Juno’s growing frustration with its slowness, because it begins to speed up. Soon, it is moving at a fairly normal pace. Juno does not seem to look less relaxed. He swallows too often, and his fingers are tight on the steering wheel even now. The asteroid begins to loom in the distance.

“The Ruby Seven is not much harder to drive than your average car,” I reassure him. “I also have access to emergency controls. You will not cause it any damage, Juno, and any you do I will take credit for.

There is no reason to feel anxious."

Juno's eye slides to look at me, and then glances away again. "Yeah, thanks, Big Guy," he says. The tone of his voice implies this is not what he was concerned about.

Juno Steel is simultaneously a simplistic and complicated person. He often says what he does not mean, even as his body says what his mouth does not. His emotions tend to be easy to read, but not the reasons behind them. He can be easy to get along with, but unpredictable in how he responds to conversation. I find him interesting, even if he is incredibly different to me.

"What do you want me to do with this big rock, huh?" Juno asks.

I realign my attention, "I would like you to drive towards the asteroid at full speed, and then pull up in front of it."

"What."

"The manoeuvre is not dangerous. It is not complicated enough for the car not to have control over the situation, and the Ruby won't let us crash as long as it knows we don't want to do so. I simply am curious to see how the car will react in minute ways to another person's driving, how quickly it will stop and with what force. I am interested as to how fine-tuned the Ruby's algorithms are."

Juno breathes out heavily. His fingers re-adjust on the steering wheel and he mumbles something under his breath, "Alright. Fine. I'll drive this car right towards a giant rock and try to park quick enough. Why not?"

We sit in silence for some moments.

"You may begin at any momen—"

"I *know*," Juno snaps. He rolls his shoulders, and begins to drive.

The Ruby accumulates in speed, the large grey hulk of the asteroid zooming towards us. Outside of the car's windows, distant pinpricks of stars blur past. The asteroid is about half as close as it needs to be before Juno — or the car, whichever reacts first — needs to pull up.

"Jesus fuck!" Juno swears suddenly, and the Ruby skids to an immediate stop, letting off a sharp tone.

Juno and I are thrown forwards in our seats violently. My own head smacks against the dash, and I hear Juno swear again.

“Shit,” he says, “Shit! I’m sorry. Fuck.”

With one hand nursing my forehead, I lean back in my seat, “What happened?”

“Hell if I should know what happened,” Juno growls. His eyes are panicked and his skin glows with embarrassment, “If this damn car’s so smart, maybe it can tell us what happened!”

The Ruby Seven whistles helpfully, and the windscreen goes black, and then lights up blue with a video. A woman with blonde hair stands in the middle of the screen.

“Depression and driving,” the audio starts, as the blonde woman smiles.

“Oh for *fuck’s* sake,” Juno reaches for the buttons on the dash, pressing them to no avail.

“People with depression can often find driving a challenge—”

“Goddamn this stupid goddamn car,” Juno snaps, furiously tapping at the windscreen as the woman talks, “Piece of goddamn s—”

“—when operating a vehicle, people prone to suicidal ideation can be confronted with—”

“Ruby, that’s enough,” I tell the car.

The video shrinks into a little diamond on the centre of the screen, which then disappears with a little ‘click’. The Ruby whistles a sad question that goes unanswered. The low hum of its motors is the only sound for some time. Juno melts back into his seat with his arms crossed over his chest and his shoulders up around his ears. He does not look at me.

“I would not have asked you to help me if I knew driving made you uncomfortable in that way,” I say at last.

“Let’s not talk about it,” Juno mutters, “There was a reason I didn’t say anything.”

I shift in my seat, “I have been told by a reliable source that I am a good listener.”

Juno snorts, “Rita isn’t a reliable source, and she only says that because you’re the only person who’ll actually listen to four hours of her talking about the same thirty minute stream episode without interrupting even once.”

“We don’t need to talk if you would prefer not to.”

Juno frowns hard. His arms unfold from over his chest, his hands falling into his lap. He hunches in on himself for a moment. There is an extended silence. Then, like the snap of a rubber band, he sighs. “Do you know what the most fucked up part of recovery is?”

The answer to this is highly subjective. I presume Juno will provide his own answer, and so I don’t say anything.

“Sometimes,” Juno says, and looks at me, “I miss it.”

His voice is even, casual as though he is expressing a passing thought. His face contorts like he’s just spat out something bitter and poison. “Sometimes… trying to get the energy to fight this thing is… so hard. And I remember how easy it was just to let it *rule* me, to stop fighting and just get drunk and get laid and stop bothering to even get out of bed the next morning.”

Juno breathes in deeply. “Sometimes I even miss the drugs,” he says, quietly. “And that’s—that’s fucking frightening. It’s like, I know I’d never go back, you know? It’s been years since I did that kind of thing, and I know I’m strong enough to resist it, even at my worst. I know that. But… knowing that somewhere deep in there there’s a part of me still capable of *wanting* it, after everything…” his breath catches in his throat. He shakes his head. “I mean, feeling like you’re one only one false step away from going back to *there*, all the time…”

He falls silent. His face half-forms expressions for a moment, and then he sighs and shakes his head again, “I had a rough night last night,” he offers, by way of apology.

I am not often comfortable to talk on this topic. For the last seven years, my process of recovery has hinged on iron-clad control over the very intrusive thoughts that Juno mentions. Dwelling on them, even only if long enough to talk about my past, feels like loosening that control.

After a moment, I settle on saying only, “I am sorry you are experiencing this.”

Juno takes a breath in. Then he pauses. Slowly, one word at a time, he says, “Look. Rita… mentioned that you, uh… struggled with… addiction. In the past.”

I stare at him. My jaw tightens.

“I guess that’s, um… why I mentioned… I thought maybe you…” Juno stumbles over fragments of sentences for some time, until he lands on one he finds himself able to complete, “How did you stop feeling that way?”

Reaching out for help is difficult. Speaking as a man who once build his identity on the idea of being untouchable, accepting my imperfections and seeking change is one of the hardest things I have ever done. Speaking as a man who knows Juno Steel — perhaps not well, but well enough — I know the same is true for him.

“I have never stopped feeling that way,” I tell him.

Juno’s eye closes, as though this was the answer he was expecting, but dreading hearing all the same. His head droops in a low nod, “Figures,” he mutters.

“However, I have found ways to work through those feelings. I find meditation very useful. Perhaps I can show you.”

Juno laughs dryly, “Yeah. You can show me, Big Guy, but I’ve never been particularly great at switching off my thoughts.”

“The aim of meditation is not to stop thinking. Allow me to show you a technique I use often. Sit with your back straight.”

Juno does as instructed, the semi-permanent slump in his back unravelling.

“Close your eyes and breathe in through the nose, and then out through the mouth.”

I watch him as he obeys. He looks younger when he is relaxed, some of the lines on his forehead a little less prominent. When I am satisfied with his breathing, I instruct, “Picture yourself sitting beside a river.”

“The only rivers I’ve ever seen are in sewer systems,” Juno mutters.

“Do you consider sewers a calming environment?”

Silence for a moment. “Yeah, actually,” Juno says at last.

Juno Steel is a curious person. “A sewer will do. This represents your state of mind. Imagine each of your thoughts as floating—” I pause. I had been going to say leaves, but I am not sure if this would be congruent with the supplied metaphor.

Juno snorts with laughter, “Floating whats, exactly?”

“Rubbish,” I settle on.

Juno sighs heavily, “Yeah, that seems about right.”

“You are not focusing on the meditation.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Juno grumbles. I wait until he has resumed calm breathing before I continue.

“As each of your thoughts enters your mind, visualise them as floating on the water. You may acknowledge them, but you must also let them pass you by. Do not let any linger for too long. It is okay if some thoughts repeat, or are slower to pass than others. But let them pass.”

I close my eyes myself and join him in meditation. My conversation with Juno has stirred up many of my own unruly thoughts. I breathe in, watch them pass me by, and breathe out again. Breathe in, watch them pass me by, and breathe out again. Breathe in—

“It is okay,” I surprise myself with the sound of my voice, “To experience… cravings. It is likely you will struggle with them for many years to come, as will I. We acknowledge them, and let them pass. It does not mean we are doomed to fail.”

I open my eyes. After a while, Juno does too. His shoulders stay slumped. His face stays calm when he looks at me, “That was… surprisingly alright, actually.”

The Ruby’s engine has stopped. Juno puts his hands back on the steering wheel, “Do you wanna give it another crack?”

“I believe we have spent long enough out here already. We will return to the Carte Blanche. Ruby, take us back,” I add to the car.

The Ruby whistles, and we begin to turn away from the asteroid.

Juno grimaces and sits back in his seat, “I’m sorry. I ruined your experiment.”

“This is not entirely true,” I say, and continue over the sound of Juno

scoffing, “I have enough notes for now, and more questions. It seems the car has a deeper understanding of its driver’s emotional state than I initially anticipated. I will repeat the experiment at a later date. Perhaps I can ask Buddy to help after all.”

Juno purses his lips, “You could still always—”

“The Thief does not touch the Ruby.”

Juno laughs softly and glances out of the window of the car, “Worth a shot.”

The Ruby Seven gets us back to the Carte Blanche, and the doors pop open to let us out.

“Thank you for your assistance, Juno,” I walk around to pop open the hood of the Ruby Seven. There will be no noticeable change to any of the car’s parts. I will check once more anyway, before I retire from my work for the evening.

I glance up to find Juno still hovering near the door of the Ruby. His hands are deep in his pockets again. When he catches my eye, he clears his throat, “Um… thanks. Like, a lot. For helping me out.”

“It is not a problem. If it helps, I meditate before breakfast every morning in the gym. Perhaps you could join me.”

Juno grins shyly. Many of Juno’s grins are shy, even when he means them. “Yeah, right, if I’m ever awake more than five minutes before breakfast, I might take you up on that.” His grin fades a little, “Thanks, Jet.”

Juno Steel is a complicated person. He is not, however, as different from myself as I had originally imagined. In just the right light, at certain angles, I feel that Juno is a person I might have had the capacity to be, if my recovery process had been only a few steps different.

“I prefer the nickname,” I tell him, and he laughs.

“Yeah, it kinda hurt me calling you Jet. I’ll… see you at dinner, Big Guy,” he says, and gives a mock two-fingered salute before he turns and walks out of the garage.

Chapter End Notes

thank you all for all the comments on the last chapter!!! comments make my day!! comment if u like this one too ;}. taking a day off for editing/to focus on other things, this story will be back on the 13th!

TWs: discussion of depression & struggles w/ substance addiction.

Buddy & Jet: A Tale of Two Old Friends

Chapter Summary

In which Buddy and Jet have a relaxing day off.

Chapter Notes

Uhhhh okay y'all as a disclaimer, this was the first chapter I wrote, back in early December. It's less heavy than the other chapters, more of a fun one, and I don't like it much anymore lol but I hope y'all do!

BUT!! What makes up for the writing in this chapter is the BEAUTIFUL art, done by Wolfy!!! <3 <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regardless of how easy I might make it look, raising a family of five thieves is not an easy task. Spending my time alternating between planning heists of a scale never been seen before in recorded history and disentangling the various inter and intrapersonal conflicts within three members of my crew in particular, all of whom have a history of isolation and systematic distrust, can really take it out of a woman.

Which is why, sometimes, I find it necessary to spend a little bit of down time with someone who really *gets* it.

“Jet, darling, you look ridiculous.”

“My apologies. They did not have a robe in my size.”

Jet is wearing a bathrobe. More accurately, Jet is testing the quality of a bathrobe by stretching it to its very limits with his broad shoulders. The fluffy white of the fabric contrasts the brown of his skin. He looks like a large tree with a fungus infection.

We are spending the day at the *Callisto Natural Day-and-Night Spa,* because not even the icy craters of Jupiter’s moons have escaped the grasp of capitalism. It’s a front for a gambling ring that I once had a hand in setting up; it served an important role in a heist plan of mine at the time. The heist is long over and the original owners long murdered, but regardless of how long it has been, the proprietors still accept my old loyalty card.

As I taught Jet myself, many years ago, and as he has continuously reminded me ever since, time to unwind is just as important as time spent slaving over a screen. Vespa is currently on orders to keep the rest of the Carte Blanche in check while we are away — they're quite capable of looking after themselves, but placing someone in charge helps prevent me from mother-henning even from afar.

We chose a private room as opposed to one of the shared bathhouses. The walls are designed to look like wood from the inside, although on the outside metal panelling keeps the frozen atmosphere away, and the roof on top is a thick glass bubble, allowing us to gaze upwards to the distant hulking red of the gas giant itself. In the middle of the room: a real, natural crater of Callisto, small enough to be appropriately bath sized, filled with hot water and retrofitted with a false bottom, spa jets and proper plumbing – what *will* they think of next?

There's a tray waiting on the side of the crater upon which is a complimentary bottle of champagne, which we specially requested to be non-alcoholic, two glasses, and an assortment of high-quality skin products. I undo my bathrobe and step into the water, "What do you think, Jet? Is this not the height of luxury?"

"No," Jet takes off his own robe and steps into the water, carefully in order not to cause a splash, "Although the owners have gone to great lengths to make us comfortable, the fact remains that this is a criminal-run tourist spot on one of Sol's least pleasant moons."

"Now, Jet, that's all a matter of perspective. I'll admit that, ideally, an escape away from stress would have a little less…corruption, but beggars can't be choosers, darling, and they've tried their very hardest." I reach over to the small card between the two glasses on the tray and open it, reading, "'To Miss Buddy Aurinko as a thank you for her service, with compliments from the owners.' Isn't that sweet of them?"

"They are attempting to win your favour, likely so they may call on you if similar trouble arises again."

"Yes, but you've got to give them credit for trying," I smile and put the card back down. After a little fumbling, I find a panel on the side of the crater that, when pressed, starts up the spa jets.

I sink down into the water and lean my head back against the edge of the crater, closing my eyes. "Mmm. Now that's more like it, don't you

think, Jet?"

"The water is very relaxing."

"It's certainly nice to get away from that tin can we call a shower-box back on board. Do you know, darling, that out of all the heinous things I've done, I think sharing a bathroom with five other people is up there with the one I despise the most."

"It can prove a challenge at times," Jet says.

I let my arms float in the water in front of me, "What do you think of our three new crew members, now that you've had some time to get to know them?"

I can hear Jet pop open the bottle of not-champagne and pour us both a glass as he thinks. Finally, he speaks: "Rita and I get along very well. Her enthusiasm helps me to find more moments of joy in my daily life, and I seek to learn as much as I can about life from her. I am very glad that she is a member of this crew. Juno has an honest soul, and has clearly learnt much since we last saw each other. I believe this is likely to do with the invaluable advice I saved onto his comms, and Rita's influence."

He leans back in the spa and says no more. I raise my eyebrow and open my eyes to look at him. The corner of his mouth twitches.

"I have had… less ability to find things I have in common with Peter Ransom," he admits. "I have no doubt that he must have some positive qualities, as you have brought him aboard this ship. I… remain unable to see them."

"Perhaps you wouldn't be so blind to his good qualities if you allowed yourself to open your eyes a little around him," I advise. "A little practised objectivity might help you see some of his good side."

He grunts at the back of his throat. "I have trouble… feeling objectively towards Peter Ransom. I find his dishonesty unlikable. I also find him to be… irritating."

"He is somewhat of an enigma, yes. But Juno trusts him, though he may be a little biased, as does Rita, and he's proved himself a capable member of this family so far. As for the *irritating* part, well." I take a deep breath, "I have interpreted his behaviour correctly, and, you understand, I am rarely incorrect, then it is my belief that Ransom is trying very, *very* hard to get you to like him. Just look at how often he

tries to talk about the Ruby 7 with you."

The line of Jet's jaw hardens at mention of the car. I laugh, "Maybe that's not the best angle if I'm trying to convince you two to get along. Let's stop talking about Ransom. I came here to relax, after all, not to sort out yet another family quarrel."

Jet relaxes. We put on the face masks we were given and Jet cuts slices off of the locally-farmed cucumbers provided to place them over our eyes. He puts a slice over each of his; I only bother with my organic eye. I spend a long, long moment listening to the bubbling of the water and clearing my mind.

There are several loud thumps from outside the door, and the sound of a laser blaster. Somebody screams. I open my mechanical eye as Jet pulls a cucumber off of one of his, and we stare at each other.

I tsk my tongue, "If there was going to be a violent outburst they should at least have the decency to do it somewhere where their V.I.Ps are not trying to enjoy themselves, don't you think?."

"Would you like me to disband the fight?"

"That's far too much effort, darling, just leave them be."

"In that case, I will include it in the review I will leave on their website."

I close my eye again. More laser blasts erupt from outside our room. Some more people scream. From what I can gather from the yelling, it seems the current owner of the gambling ring here caught his wife with one of his loyal customers, and she and the customer are trying to make an escape with the gambling ring's riches. A rather typical cause for argument. I sink myself deeper into the spa, "Jet, darling, look for a button that plays music on that panel, would you?"

"Yes, Buddy."

I hear the swishing of water and after a moment some classical music begins. It's a piece I recognise and I smile, "This is what was playing when we first met. Do you remember that?"

"Yes: it is one of my favourite pieces. It reminds me of the lifelong debt we owe to each other that we continue to pay with mutually assured loyalty."

“Oh, Jet, you flatter me.”

“I was merely stating fact.”

“I’m well aware.”

We enjoy the music for a while. I think back a moment to my first interactions with Jet: when he was a customer at my bar. The drive on the way to the hospital, where I vomited no less than three times into the back of the Ruby 7 – perhaps the biggest thing Jet Sequilak has ever done for me is let that slide with no hard feelings. But the past is a painful thing to dwell on, and there is no point to think on it when I am a woman much more occupied with the future, and the things to come.

“Buddy.”

“Yes, Jet?”

“Thank you for taking me with you today. Adjusting to life aboard the Carte Blanche has, at times, proved stressful. I was in need of an opportunity to meditate, and I greatly enjoy your company.”

There is not much about Jet that surprises me anymore. The feeling is almost as surprising as the surprise itself. I open my mechanical eye, “You should have told me earlier. I wasn’t aware you’d been feeling stressed.”

Two large cucumber slices look back at me seriously from a face slathered in bright green. “It can be difficult adjusting to living in close quarters with new people.”

“Never a dull moment, that’s for sure.”

“Would you like to join me in some mindful breathing exercises?”

“That sounds wonderful, darling.”

We spend the next twenty minutes or so breathing as according to Jet’s mindfulness routine, which he designed himself. It involves a lot of slow breathing, and a lot of repeating some of Jet’s favourite proverbs a simply ridiculous amount of times. For a man who struggles with similes, Jet relies on the power of proverbs an astounding amount.

We are interrupted when the door to our room is torn off of its hinges

and a bandit comes running into the room.

“Hands where I can see ‘em,” the man sneers, “Ain’t you heard? This spa is under *new* manage—”

I am afraid he doesn’t quite get to finish his message. Jet stands up from the spa and with one huge paw to the top of the head, sends the man crumpling onto the ground.

I peel the cucumber off my organic eye and finish off my champagne before I speak, “That was a little harsh. He’ll have one hell of a headache when he wakes up.”

“I do not like my meditation to be interrupted.” Jet turns to me, “I think it is time our relaxation comes to an end.”

“Unfortunately, I’m inclined to agree.”

We towel ourselves off and then slide our bathrobes back on. We head back out towards the locker room where our clothes and weapons have been stored.

“Oh dear,” I say, “This simply won’t do.”

The lockers have all been raided. The metal doors are torn off and filled with dents of laser fire. I find, among the wreckage, the locker that was ours and confirm that it is empty. “Jet. What in Sol are we meant to do now?”

“I suggest that we find the bandits and take back the items that they stole.”

“Now, *that,”* I tell him, “Is a good idea.”

The criminals aren’t hard to find. We simply follow the sound of drunken laughter to one of the public bathhouses. A preliminary glimpse inside shows us a group of ten or so amateurs – in the middle of them is the wife of the previous owner, laughing and helping herself to more champagne.

“Well,” I turn to Jet and smile at him, “There’s nothing quite like taking down a ring of thieves to really tie off a relaxing day out, don’t you think?”

“I do not find physical violence to be relaxing.”

“Don’t be so pragmatic, darling, we won’t hurt any of them too

critically. This will be good fun. When's the last time you and I engaged in a little exercise together?"

Jet looks up at the roof while he, no doubt, attempts to count back to the last time he and I performed Tai Chi. I don't bother to let him finish the train of thought: I burst into the room.

"Hey!"

"What're you—"

"You can't be—"

"Terribly sorry, gentlemen," I put both my hands in the air, "I simply became lost on my way to the bathroom."

"Wait a minute," one of the men, an ugly thing with a scar in the shape of a cross on his cheek, stands up and points at me, "Ain't you Buddy Aurinko?"

Jet bursts in the door, "Buddy," he says, "We last performed exercise together six months, two weeks, and three days ago."

"And that's—" the man turns and goes pale at the sight of Jet, "Vespa?"

"She's, uh—bigger than what the legends say," a second bandit with a black bandana says.

I have no words for the thoughts that flicker through my mind, save for a few good insults I've learnt, but I'm saving them up to use on Peter Ransom the next time his emotional constipation almost loses us a mission. So: "Good grief," I say, and I flip the nearest bandit over my shoulder and onto the ground.

That's when hell breaks loose.

The other nine bandits jump to their feet, and the woman in the middle of them screams. They start coming towards us, a few loosing blasters from hidden holsters and others unsheathing knives. I take the blaster off of the man I just threw and take cover behind a rather ugly vase.

"The hell are you doin'?!" Cross-scar shouts, "There's nine of us and two of you!"

"I would also like to know the plan," Jet says as he dodges a

drunkenly-aimed laser blast and reaches out, crushing the man's blaster in his fist.

"No plan, darling, just some good old fashioned fun," a few laser blasts leave one of the bandits motionless, but at the cost of the vase I'm behind smashing into pieces, "Just like we used to."

[image]

"We are not as young as we once were," Jet notes. He swings the man who tried to shoot him around by the arm and knocks a further two bandits over, before picking them up and hitting their heads together.

"Help! *Help!*" screams the woman in the middle of the room.

"Oh, do shut *up,* darling, nobody's hurting you," I shoot a blast which goes wide, sigh, and take out the oncoming bandit with a roundhouse kick to the head. "On that note, Jet, you're always honest: do you think I'm getting too old for that red dress? The one with the split up the side. Showing off a lot of skin used to be beneficial for my looks, but now I fear it does quite the opposite."

"What are you two *talking* about?" Bandana-bandit cries, and almost goes complacently along with Jet, who guides him straight into the wall.

"The dress is made for a younger woman," Jet muses. "However: there is a certain self-confidence you possess when wearing it that neutralises these effects. I also believe that age is to be celebrated. The dress is a monument to your younger beauty while also celebrating your current strength," Jet stops with his hand on the shoulder of a bandit. The bandit kicks and tries to pull a knife, but Jet simply holds him back like a small child. "Does that answer your question?"

"Above and beyond. Jet, you wonderful man, we will make a poet out of you yet."

The bandit Jet is holding back stops wiggling and Jet simply reaches over to pinch a point that has him crumpling to the ground, fainted away, "I have always felt that poetry might be my true calling."

I look around us. The room is filled with softly groaning drunk criminal novices, and I don't envy them the double-whammy of a hangover they will have in the morning. I brush my hands off. "That was fun."

Jet counts the bodies on the floor, “We are missing one bandit.”

“Ah,” I say, and then I hear the blaster click behind me.

“Turn around,” a man sneers, “Or your wife here watches you die.”

“Good lord,” I turn around.

“That’s right,” Cross-scar sneers, “Thought you’d come around to my point of view once you thought about your missus having to scrape your brains off of the floor.”

“We might need to get you some glasses, darling,” I tell him, “You really have no idea what you’re imply—”

“No time for jokes,” his eyes narrow and the barrel of the blaster jams against my forehead. The man with the scar smiles with dyed-green teeth, “Here I was thinkin’ that all I’d get out of today is a new business venture. Imagine what they’ll say to me once they find out that I—Smithy Jenkins!—killed *Buddy Aurinko*. Smithy Jenkins: the boy they made fun of in high-school. ‘Here comes Smithy,” he imitates crudely, “The boy who only eats damp spaghetti noodles’, they used to say. Well now—”

Smithy Jenkins makes a sudden sound and drops to the floor. I turn to Jet and sigh, “Darling, I was perfectly capable of getting out of that situation myself.”

“You were not making any movements,” Jet puts the blaster he has in his hand back into the holster of a fallen bandit, “I assumed your blaster was faulty.”

“No,” I turn back to the body of Smithy Jenkins. “I just really wanted to know what he had to say.” I toe the body, “What kind of man only eats damp spaghetti noodles?”

“What a strange man,” Jet says.

“And not half as good a wordsmith as you, dear.”

“Smithy!”

The woman I’d totally forgotten about the moment she stopped screaming comes falling to her knees between us, placing her hands on the body of Jenkins. She falls to pieces over him, and the show of emotion is pathetic enough that I don’t want to embarrass the poor

thing by telling her he's only stunned. I leave her be and walk across the room to collect our things.

"What will happen to the *Callisto Natural Day-and-Night Spa* now?" Jet asks me.

"Oh, some other poor schmuck will come through and try to take over it," I wave his concern aside, "That or it will be claimed by the local government and used as some big-wig's personal bathing ground."

I pause, and then look back at the sprawled out bodies in the room around me, the weeping woman who thinks she's lost a partner. "Say, Jet?"

"Yes, Buddy?"

"How would you like to join me in owning the *Callisto Natural Day-and-Night Spa*? And give a few of these stragglers a job opportunity while they have it: I doubt their career in crime will take them far."

"Buddy," Jet turns to me, his face as serious as I've ever seen it, which is mildly impressive with the large smudge of green facemask underneath his bottom lip like an algae beard, "It would be my honour."

We leave the details with the crying woman, who cheers up incredibly fast after we talk to her. Interestingly, most of the cheering up seems to happen before we tell her that her dear Smithy Jenkins is alive and well and that we will not be compensating her for her loss. We strike a deal and send a copy of her details to Rita, who whips us up a contract in the amount of time it takes to share a cucumber between the three of us and get changed back into our clothes. Then, deals all signed, we are on our way.

"—and *after* Mista Steel and I finish eating all of the salmon snacks we're gonna spend time doin' each-other's facemasks and I don't care how goo-goo eyes he's gonna be for seein' Mista Ransom in his bathrobe, he and I are gonna spend the whole afternoon *alone* and that means *you ain't invited, Ransom, you hear me? Yes you, I'm talkin'a'you—"*

"I understand you're very excited, Rita, darling," I try to say louder than the sounds of Rita shouting and Ransom making very confused and slightly insulted noises in the background, "But we have to go now. I'll see you when I'm back aboard the ship."

“I don’t even care how well you can do my makeup, Mista, I ain’t lettin’ you stop me and Mista Steel from hangin’ out, you get to have him all the time and—oh, alright Buddy! See you!”

I tuck my comms into my back pocket and raise an eyebrow at Jet, “You have interesting taste in idols, my dear.”

“She is very wise,” Jet replies gravely, “And has taught me much about which streams are acceptable forms of entertainment. I have now learnt that Magicka Wolf Girls is not the ground-breaking art-piece I once thought it to be, but in reality a very shallow representation of the genre of ancient-style 2D animation.”

“You’ll have to show me an episode one time,” I tell him as we get settled into the shuttle, “I have to admit I’m not very educated on the topic myself.”

“It would be my pleasure.”

“Well,” I lean back in my seat and stretch back, hearing my vertebrae crack. The sign of being old doesn’t worry me very often: I know I’ve still got it, and I don’t plan on giving it up any time soon. Especially not with Jet Sequiliak by my side. “It’s been wonderful falling back into old habits with you today, darling.”

Chapter End Notes

as always... comment if you liked...

Vespa & Peter: Boiling Over (Literally and Figuratively)

Chapter Summary

In which Peter Ransom can't cook for shit.

Chapter Notes

TW: this chapter contains some self-deprecating/canon-typical ableist language because it's from Vespa's POV.

Peter is a little theatrically stupid in this. God I hope he's not actually this stupid in canon, but like... that whole scene with Nova DID happen.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ransom. You’re with me.”

Peter Ransom, all long leg and doe-eye, blinks up at me from where he’s sitting on the couch, reading something on his comms while Steel naps on his chest. He looks at me like he has no possible idea what I could ever want, “Pardon?”

I may not actively suspect him of wanting to kill us all in our sleep anymore, but sometimes I still I can’t stand this guy. He thinks he can blink his pretty-boy eyes and act like an idiot enough that we’ll all forget we saw him kill a man where he stood two days ago. Buddy says he tries his hardest, but he sure likes to be useless as all fuck whenever he’s actually at risk of being asked to do something for me.

“I said you’re with me. You’re on kitchen tonight.”

Peter blinks at me again, and then lets out this little polite rich-kid laugh and says, “Ah, there’s been a misunderstanding. You see, Buddy excused me from kitchen duty after—”

“After you almost burnt the place down making cup noodles? Yeah, I was there.” I cross my arms over my chest and narrow my eyes at him, “Real convenient, isn’t it, that you’re so bad at cooking?”

Peter shrugs both his shoulders, “I suppose you could see it that way.”

“In fact, I distinctly remember *somebody* having to do your half of the

chores, because… let me see if I remember this bit correctly… you don't know how to use a mop?"

"Buddy's been meaning to teach me, only she's rather busy—"

"Don't you put this on Buddy," I scoff at him, "You think nobody else onboard this ship could teach you how to clean floors?"

"Well, given that my duties have been shifted elsewhere, it hasn't been my top priority, to be honest. Vespa, I… don't really know where this is coming from," Peter says, "There were unique circumstances in my childhood which meant I never had the opportunity to learn certain skills, and I'm really rather sensitive—"

I cannot believe what is coming out of his privileged-upbringing mouth with his educated-accent voice. "Are you honest-to-God about to tell me I'm being insensitive of the fact that you've never had to do chores in your life?"

Peter's mouth opens and closes. "Well. When you put it that way—"

"Here's how it's going to go, Ransom," I tell him, "You're gonna get up, and you're going to help me with dinner. And if you don't pull your weight like you should, I'm going to gut you."

"That feels… somewhat extreme," Peter says, his voice weak and strained.

"I'm not feeling very patient, *Pete*," I wrap my fingers around the hilt of my knife. "Don't make me get persuasive."

"Mm. There's no need to resort to that, I'm happy to do what I can to help," says Ransom, who sounds like he'd rather be doing literally anything else.

He sighs, and starts trying to squeeze himself out from underneath Juno without waking him up. It's increasingly frustrating to watch him try, and I'm just about to shout to wake Steel up when he grunts and shifts.

I groan and turn away so I don't have to hear or see them being all mushy with each other while Peter apologises for waking him.

"Right," Peter says eventually, from beside me.

"Finally," I start walking and let him follow me, from a safe enough

distance that there's no point in him talking. I don't really want to deal with his verbosity right now. Or ever, really.

"What are we cooking tonight?" Peter pipes up over my shoulder, because the universe apparently hates me.

"It's a Monday," I remind him, with all the patience I have, "Which means I'm cooking. Which means it's steamed vegetables, rice, and chicken. Even you can't ruin it."

"Ah, yes, my favourite night!" Peter says.

There's a lot anybody with half a working brain wouldn't trust about Peter Ransom, and since I qualify in that category, even if only barely, I'm not exactly on *friendly terms* with him. Buddy tells me not to be so paranoid, but how can you trust a man that wears a personality like an outfit? He changes every day on board this ship — half of the time he's this happy-go-lucky, vaguely stupid, chirpy front he's putting on now; the other half he haunts the halls late at night and sounds clipped and tired when he talks, has flashes of something darker written into the corners of his mouth and hiding in the blackness of his eyes. Until I figure out which one of those is the mask, Ransom's in my bad book.

"Yeah," I say. "That why you usually pass your chicken to Steel when you think I can't see you?"

"Ah. Perhaps I'm vegetarian?"

"I'd believe that if you didn't go rabid on the butter chicken Juno makes on curry night."

"What if that's my cheat day?"

"Your cheat day at being vegetarian?"

He laughs a little, "Alright. Touché."

We cross into the kitchen and I turn on him, barring his entrance and putting my hands on my hips. He's a lot taller than me but he stops in his tracks, and I get the satisfaction of seeing his provocatively skinny throat bob as he swallows.

"Right," I snap at him, "Tell me step one to steaming vegetables."

"Well, I…" Ransom says, and then trails off. He narrows his eyes at

me for a second, and then says, "…suppose you start with boiling the kettle."

"The kettle," I parrot.

Ransom looks a little sick. "For the steam?"

"I know you're not being serious," I snarl at him, "Don't think you're getting out of this by playing stupid. Answer the question."

"Right," Ransom says. "Right, yes, my apologies… um. You boil water on the stove, of course."

"The steamer pot is under that cabinet," I point. Then, looking at his face, I add, "The one with two pots, one that has holes in it, you moron. I'll get you the vegetables. They're organic, not sim-food, so don't even *think* about getting this wrong on purpose or I swear to God I'll have you paying for every cred they cost."

"Ah. Of course."

I go to the fridge and pull out the bundles of fresh green beans and carrots. They still smell like dirt, and *that* is the mark of quality. As ship's doctor, and therefore nutritionist, I might hate most of the people I work with, but I'm sure not going to contribute to that by making them annoying *and* sick.

I wash the vegetables and put them on a chopping board, top and tail the beans, and slice the carrots. Then I take them over to Ransom.

"What are you doing?"

"I—" Ransom looks up at me from where he's been fiddling. All four stovetops are bright red with heat, and he *actually has* both pans on different stove tops, "I'm not quite sure how I managed to turn them all on—"

I put the vegetables down and I slam him out of the way. I almost expect him to fall dramatically and decide he can't do chores because of a sudden twisted ankle, but he only falls back against the kitchen counter with a small hiss of pain and falls silent.

It takes two seconds to fix the goddamn stove. I glare at him, pick up the handle of the steaming pot, and keep eye contact with him while I slam it on top of the other one. At least it has water in it. He got that far.

“I… was wondering how we were going to stop the vegetables from falling through the holes,” he admits, meekly.

I decide maybe not reacting to how stupid he sounds will help him cut the idiocy crap. “Carrots first,” I demand, “They take longer to soften up. Beans a little bit later. But get them soggy and they’re ruined. I’m going to start on the chicken. Once you’re finished with the vegetables, put on a pot of rice. I’m *sure* you can do that.”

I don’t even wait for him to reply. I leave him at the bench and pull out the chicken from the freezer. I whack it into the defroster and wait.

…I glance over at him.

He’s using the tip of the knife I cut the vegetables with to slowly coax each individual slice of carrot into the pot. If I had hoped I’d see any more competency by secretly watching him, I don’t. He’s really committed to this whole getting-out-of-chores thing.

I don’t like it. Anybody who isn’t willing to pull their weight on Buddy and my ship can’t be up to anything good. And then the paranoia starts to sneak back in: one thought at a time that slowly begins to grow, and snowball, because suddenly things all make sense. I think you’ve got to be out of your mind to let this man on your ship, and it can’t *just* be paranoia, because I know Jet thinks so, too. He’s too many things and none of them at the same time. He’s a human zoetrope — glimpses of lifeless pieces, pictures of people he’s created, projected outwards and moving fast enough to give the illusion of a seamless, breathing human being.

The only bit I can’t get is *why Juno* — why entangle yourself with a coworker like that if you’re only here to betray us all?

Ransom picks up the lid beside the stove. I watch him put the lid on. Then take it off. Then put it on again.

“Stop fucking around or you’ll mess them up,” I growl at him, “Keep the lid on.”

Ransom glances at me. His face is red from letting the steam billow in his face like some kind of idiot. He puts the lid on the pot and steps back.

The defroster finishes with the chicken and I pull it out. I get out the meat chopping board and slap the chicken out of its tray down onto it.

I grab a knife out of the holder in front of me, and start cutting.

Ransom walks over to me.

“Watch it,” I growl at him, “A cut with a knife that’s been in raw chicken could really fuck you up.”

“I beg your pardon, I didn’t mean to intrude,” he says.

I really cannot stand this guy.

There’s peaceful, blissful silence for half a moment before he speaks again. “Have you always enjoyed cooking?” he asks.

“It’s not a matter of *enjoying*, it’s a matter of having had to learn how to cook or have the people you love starve,” I snap back at him, “Not that you’d know about that.”

“I suppose I wouldn’t,” he says quietly. It surprises me — there’s a weight to his voice, a reflectiveness I can’t place. Like he’s guilty for… something, or regretful, or maybe just sympathetic. It’s… strange.

There’s silence again. Something sizzles on the stove.

“Beans!” Peter exclaims.

I frown at him, “You can just say fuck—”

“No, I forgot to put the beans on! And—oh, fuck.”

I glance over and then throw my knife down. The pot has started bubbling over onto the stove, “God damnit— wait one second,” I reach for the cloth hanging on the handle of the cupboard to wipe my hands. “Don’t touch it!”

Too late. Peter actually tries to pick up the steaming pot with his actual hands, and then he yelps and drops it. There’s an incredible crash, and things happen fast all at once. Carrot slices go flying onto the floor. Peter waves his hands to cool them down, hits them against the fucking bench, takes a step back to get away, stands on a bunch of wet carrots, and ends up on his flat ass on the floor with a strangled scream.

Maybe — *maybe* — I would have some space to find it funny, if I wasn’t fucking *livid.*

I haul Ransom to his stupid feet and shove him to the sink. “Put your

hands under here," I snap, turning on the cold water. Anger and frustration builds in me just like the stupid goddamn kettle Peter thought you steam vegetables with, until he turns off the tap and I slam him around so his tailbone is against the counter and pull my knife on him.

"What is *wrong* with you?!" I hiss, pressing the tip of it into his idiotic chest, "Just admit it: you're doing this on purpose. You love driving me insane, you think it's funny to watch me be stressed, and you *want* this whole mission to fall apart. Admit it!"

"Vespa— I—"

"Don't you 'Vespa, I' me!" I shout, and move my knife up to his throat. "Nobody's this *stupid.* I know you're up to something, Ransom, I haven't liked you since the moment you set foot here and I *knew* you were a scheming, lying, filthy, pathetic criminal son-of-a—"

"Vespa, please, put the knife down!"

My hand is shaking on my knife. I'm not even pushing it into his skin, just holding it there and shaking like I've never held a knife before in my life. I realise I'm not angry, I'm scared. Paranoid. Just like Buddy said.

I sheath my knife. "What did you think? That I was going to stab you?" I spit at him, and then step back. "You're more fucked up than I thought."

I can almost hear him think *the feeling is mutual.* I snap my gaze up to challenge him, dare him to say it out loud, and stop.

His head is bowed, his hands folded together in a gesture of respect I recognise from the Outer Rim. They're shaking slightly, and red from the burn.

"I'm sorry, Vespa," he says. "I should have told you from the beginning that I had no idea what I was doing, and that I needed your help. I should have been honest." He glances up at me and lowers his hands, "The honest truth is that I find it rather embarrassing that I was never taught how to do chores, like cook or clean."

He sighs, and forces out a few more halting sentences, "Exposing my… inadequacies… tends to lead to my self-critical thoughts… escalating. It's easier for me to pretend I'm ignorant than admit I'm aware of how useless my contributions to this ship, this *family*, are."

His skinny shoulders are drawn in tightly. There's a downward turn to his mouth, and he won't meet my eyes. "To be completely honest, I spent a great deal of time as a young boy living on the streets. I stole meals, and never needed to clean for myself. When I was eventually taken in, I moved between houses fast enough that those skills were never needed — and my work has never kept me in one place for long enough for it to matter, before."

"I know you've had trouble trusting me. To that, all I can say is that you're fair to do so. I have not been honest with this crew in the past, I haven't been honest with you today, and I find it difficult to connect with other people in a way that isn't… superficial, or temporary. It has been… a long time since I last placed my trust in another person. Longer still since I last placed my trust in… a family unit. Both times, my trust was… misjudged. I am trying my best to adjust to being vulnerable, but you'll have to excuse my hesitance in the meanwhile. I'm sorry for giving you reason to doubt my intentions."

That's the most amount of words Peter Ransom has ever spoken to me in one go. I eye him over. At first, I'm not sure if I believe this street-urchin sob story, but after a second, he glances back at me. He has all the tell-tale signs: he's gone a little pale, his knuckles are white where one hand grips at the bench, he looks like he's about to throw up.

The zoetrope stops for a second. I get a glance at the real image. And I… can understand. I know what having trouble trusting is like. I've had my fair share of family problems, too. There's a part of me that wants to ask him more -- wants to know if he knows what I know, about what the people in your life who are meant to protect you can do. But this isn't a therapy session.

I shrug one shoulder at him. "Shouldn't have not believed you when you tried to tell me you couldn't do this," I mutter. "Not all your fault."

He smiles shakily. It's a bad look on him.

"Let me get your burns fixed up, you goofus," I tell him, "And then we'll cook the rest of dinner. At least you didn't ruin the beans. I'm still deducting the carrots from your pay, though."

"That seems fair to me."

There's a first aid kit in the kitchen in the cupboard above the fridge. A couple fast-acting ointments and some ice cold water later, and he's good as new.

I show him how to put the beans on, and get him to test with a fork until they're just soft enough to be ready to eat. They come out of the water just on the wrong side of squishy, but not enough to be a major issue.

I watch him very closely on the rice. Good-cooked rice is an art, and badly-cooked rice is a curse. I have to explain to him three times that he needs to salt the water for the rice, but eventually he gets it. Somehow, despite my instructions to stir regularly while I finish frying the chicken (I'm not quite ready to trust him with raw meat), some sticks on the bottom, but look — kid has to start somewhere. Even if it drives me absolutely insane.

"You know," Ransom says as he drains the rice into the sink, "I've just remembered the recipe to this *charming* little salad dressing I had in a restaurant on Pluto once."

"Have you?" I ask, warily.

"Well, I remember how it tastes. Lemon and mint and such. I'm sure I can figure it out."

"You think you're ready to make something from memory?" I ask him.

He scoffs, "I may have been bad, but I wasn't exactly incompetent. And how hard can blending a few ingredients together be? No offence, Vespa, but I think I'm ready to try something a little more intense than boiling rice."

I look him up and down. His apron is on backwards. He doesn't even need an apron for rice, and he sure as hell wasn't wearing it ten minutes ago. I find I really don't want to know where the hell he got it from.

"Okay," I tell him, "Go wild. The blender's in the cupboard over there. Anything in the pantry is free game."

He beams.

"Well," Buddy says, "Look at what our chefs have made us."

"I heard a lotta screamin'," Rita eyes her plate and prods it with a fork, "At first I thought you was killin' the chicken right in the kitchen, but then I realised if there was a live chicken on this ship I would've known about it! And anyway it sounded more like a terrified

baby screamin'--"

Peter coughs into his napkin.

"—and I thought wow! A real baby on this ship, Rita's gonna be an *aunt!* And then I remembered ain't none of those who can get pregnant on this ship are, which was really disappointing on accounta I've always wanted to be an aunt cause I think I'd be real good with children, showin' them the right streams and teachin' em howta hack into corporations. I forget where I was goin' w this."

"Rita…" Juno sighs.

"Let her finish," Jet grumbles.

"Ooh! Ooh! So anyway then I was gonna go check to see if there really was a baby chicken that got stowed away on one of our missions somehow and needed an aunt figure! But Captain A told me not to and that it was just probably some 'much needed bonding time' which I don't really understand but it's okay I guess because we're all here for dinner so I don't really know what I'm complaining about!"

"Lovely," Peter says to Rita. Then he gestures to the table at large, "Well, everybody: dig in. Vespa and I spent good time on preparing this for you all."

I roll my eyes. Soon enough, though, we all get lost into eating. Hunger is pretty much a constant on this ship, with the work and training we're doing every day, and I even see Juno force down two whole beans before he scrapes the rest off into his lap in that disgusting way he does. He thinks I don't see him do it every night but I honestly just think if I ever confronted him about it it would be the final straw. I'm going to have to start sneaking vegetables into his lunches like a parent of the world's fussiest toddler.

Peter puts down his fork suddenly with a clatter and says, "Oh! I forgot to mention. I made some dressing for the chicken, based off a Plutonian recipe. I'd love for you all to try it."

"Ooh!" Rita reaches out to pick up the cup of thick yellow liquid in the centre of the table.

"I wouldn't," I warn her, "I saw what went in that."

Ransom glares at me.

“I’ll try it, honey,” Juno soothes him, and picks up the dressing. He drizzles it over his chicken, and then cuts a slice and eats it. Ransom watches him the whole time.

“Mm!” Juno’s eyes go wide and he stops chewing. He nods a few times, slowly, and then swallows, “Wow. Plutonian, um… dressing is really… flavoursome.”

“You don’t like it,” Ransom says, certain and gloomy.

“No! No, sweetheart, no, I didn’t say that. I just think… you know, I just think I put it on a little too thickly.” He begins to scrape it off with his knife, nodding again. “Really, I’m sure it must great otherwise.”

“That might be it,” Ransom agrees.

Juno eats another slice. Chews. Swallows. Then nods again.

“You know,” he says, slowly, “This has given me a cute idea for a date night.”

“Oh?” Ransom beams.

“Yeah! I should give you a few cooking lessons sometime, now that you’re going to be helping in the kitchen from now on. I have a recipe for a Martian dressing that I think you could really benefit from learning.”

Ransom’s face falls.

Maybe I don’t trust him yet. And maybe I’m not sure how much of his everyday behaviour is put on. But in the kitchen, in that moment, I know the Peter Ransom I saw was real. And I realise to myself that there’s only one other time I see him like that — still enough to catch. It’s when he’s with Juno, when he thinks nobody else can see or hear.

I glance over at Buddy on the table, who gives me an eyebrow-raise and a look that says *What a night you must’ve had.*

I know what it’s like to find somebody who makes you feel safe enough to be real like that. How it feels to find a pillar of trust in the middle of a world that never stops crumbling away under your feet. Maybe I don’t trust Ransom — but he doesn’t trust me either, and maybe… maybe that’s alright.

If he’s expecting I’m going to go any easier on him now, though, he’s got another thing coming.

Chapter End Notes

> Will I beg for comments in the end notes of all fifteen of these chapters? Stay tuned to find out! (Yes).

Buddy & Peter: Family

Chapter Summary

In which Peter wants what he doesn't deserve.

Chapter Notes

[tips in a little bit of hard of hearing nureyev juice] [tips in just a dash of trans nureyev] [tips--oh god, oh fuck oh god i knocked over the projection juice somebody help oh my god its everywhere oh go

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“One moment, darling,” comes a muffled voice from within the room.

I slide my hands into the pockets of my high-waisted pants and wait.

Ridiculous. You look ridiculous.

I frown at myself, and shake the thought. There’s nothing ridiculous whatsoever about why I am here. And as for the way I am dressed, thank you very much, is it so unreasonable that a man may want to look presentable when visiting someone he very much respects?

They’ve been like that since I turned my gaze inwards, my thoughts. As if by rummaging through the doors I’ve sequestered my thoughts behind in my mind, I’ve somehow loosened the locks. Now words float up through the cracks without the full thought attached to them, like heads of wiggling insects that dart away when I reach for them, leaving me struck by strange half-desires and fragments of introspection I can’t for the life of me place.

The door slides open. Buddy is wearing a silken nightdress despite it being, as far as the ship’s clock is concerned, mid-afternoon. Her hair is slightly dishevelled, enough that I can see the orange iris of her mechanical eye pointing at me from its nest in rotted skin. My eyes glance quickly over her shoulder and alight on Vespa in an undershirt glaring at me from the blankets.

“Uh—A—Aha…haha,” my mouth supplies unhelpfully, “I realise I’ve interrupted… something. My apologies. I’ll come back another time.”

“No need for that, dear, you’ve solidly killed the mood,” Buddy says,

as cheerfully as anything she says, though her smile is equal parts amused and exasperated. *Predictable Peter*, it says. My skin crawls.

Vespa thumps her head into the pillow over Buddy's shoulder.

"I… am not sure how to take that," I say.

"Not much to take, darling. Knock on any woman's door incessantly enough and I think you'll find you'll ruin her mood for much anything. So," she splays a hand outwards to me, "What, Peter Ransom, could you *possibly* want?"

There is an effect, I've realised, that Buddy Aurinko has on me. There's nothing so particularly arrogant about her, nothing intentionally condescending. Yet, I find myself feeling like the long-limbed, bony-kneed teenager I haven't been in twenty years in front of her, incredibly chastised and, well… quite ordinary.

Predictable, ordinary, inexperienced. She manages to strip me back to my bare bones rather easily. Which is why I know I seek her out when I'm feeling this way.

That. That is what I've been trying to realise: what it is I'm feeling, and why. I dive for the thought, but it's already gone.

"I… had one of my shirts go missing in the wash," I hear my own voice say in the meanwhile. I notice I'm holding my arms close to my chest, and can't quite convince myself to let them go; the prickle of knowing I am wearing my emotions so outwardly crawls under my skin. "I wondered if you could check if it made it to your cupboard."

Buddy contemplates me for a moment. Then she smiles, like she's found exactly what she's looking for. Like I'm a child who has found my way to her door in the aftermath of a nightmare and she's just remembered the words to my favourite nursery rhyme. She's getting faster at doing that. She knows me too well.

Buddy steps away from the door, "You can search for your shirt on your own, if you'd like," she says, "Just keep away from the drawers, darling. I'm positively certain your shirt wouldn't have ended up tangled in with my intimates."

"I—yes," I step past her into the room. Vespa shifts in the sheets and glares at me as I pass her into Buddy's closet.

"How are we supposed to know he's not just looking for an excuse to

snoop?" she growls, once I pass the threshold, low in her throat, probably too quiet to hear if I hadn't long ago figured out how to boost my hearing aid.

"I trust him, dear. He's been no threat to us yet. And anyway, if his designs revealed themselves to be sinister, you and I could fashion a nameless grave for the nameless thief in a remarkably short amount of time."

I have a feeling she knows I hear her say that. So I have not yet fully earned her trust, despite the few months we've been living together. I suppose that is only to be expected. Buddy Aurinko is forgiving, but not an idiot. I've changed, but I'm sure she's learned by now not to trust a sudden change in demeanour. Her threat rolls down my spine and settles there. I start leafing through her hung shirts to ignore it.

There's more quiet conversation, the shuffling of bedsheets and footsteps, and I hear the door open and shut. I lean my head out of the closet, "Buddy?"

She's still in the room, "Pete. Are you ready to talk about whatever you're actually here for at last?"

"Ha," I retreat back into her closet, "Just here for the shirt, I'm afraid."

"I'll take that as a no, then," Buddy's voice gets closer. I resist the urge to glance over for an impressively long time; by the time I do, she's leaning against the entrance to the closet.

I look back at her shirts, select a gorgeous red one, and pull it down. "I love this," I tell her. "I don't suppose you'd let me borrow it some time."

"No offence, Ransom, but I don't think that one's quite your style."

"How do you mean?" I frown. I put the shirt up against my body. There's no mirror, so I have to leave it to Buddy's appraisal.

"To be quite frank, you don't have the tits to fill it out."

"Ah." I turn the shirt around and look at it properly, "I see."

"Unfortunately the pattern of that particular piece makes it rather inflexible. That being said, if you happen to have a padded bra stashed in your growing pile of stolen knick-knacks around

somewhere, then go for your life, darling."

I don't. Juno likely does, but I doubt it would fit me around the back. I put the shirt back. The… full-chested look had never suited me, anyway.

"Feel free to borrow whatever you'd like otherwise. We're family, after all. I'm sure some of these shirts and dresses would look quite striking on you."

"Thank you," I finish searching through one wall of her closet and turn to the next. Shirts of varying materials and styles, common only in their high calibre, shift through my fingers. I can feel Buddy's eyes on me. The clothes pass in a blur.

"How's life treating you, Ransom?" Buddy asks.

"Oh, well enough," I respond.

"You seem a lot happier since the whole situation between you and Juno sorted itself."

"I'll take that to mean you approve of our relationship. Thank you, although perhaps I would be more grateful if you could convince Vespa to see from your point of view." If a frustrated edge tints my voice, it is not out of a lack of respect for Vespa. Only her incessant nipping at the both of our throats, and taking advantage of Juno's argumentative nature.

"I will not be convincing my Vespa to see anything. If you'd so like you and Juno to gain her trust, you must work it out yourself." She smiles, "Or perhaps, tone it down on the PDA. I don't think she appreciates seeing your mouth on Juno's at breakfast when the two of us can hardly have a moment together without interruption."

Guilt tugs at me for the interruption once again, even though, try hard as I may, I can't quite make myself feel guilty for flashing what I get to have in front of the rest of the crew's faces. Vain, insensitive, avaricious – I'll take those accusations gladly. I worked very hard for a lot of my life in order to be all of those things.

And then something else tugs at me — an insecurity that's been growing within me for quite some time; small, but powerful enough that its roots have twisted through the core of me — something along the lines of having weaponised your personality around the singleminded desire to survive, and how when one no longer finds

themselves living in such conditions, one has the creeping, horrifying sensation that the person they've fashioned themselves into isn't one they wish to be.

I fight against the rising wave of depersonalisation, that threatens to send me spiralling out of my own body in a state of self-terror for the next few hours or so, by refocusing on the shirts. I push down these new anxieties — I have suffered worse with less complaint.

I finish with the second wall of her closet and turn to the third. I'm slowly making my way back around to face her again. Out of my peripheral vision, I can see Buddy staring me down.

My fingers falter, tangled in silver fabric from a shirt that is definitely not mine. None of these shirts are mine, in fact. It seems my visit was for no real reason. I feel a twitch in my fingers, a sudden urge to do something… something…

The thought's already gone. I let go of the shirt.

I laugh airily, "You know, I seem to have made a mistake. If you'll excuse—"

"Peter," Buddy bars my exit.

My fingers twitch by my thigh, where I usually keep my spare knife in its holster. I haven't felt the need to keep spare knives so close to me when aboard the Carte Blanche in a while, and even so, would never dare draw one against her, buts she sees the movement and steps swiftly aside, hands up in a gesture of peace.

I don't step past her.

She looks evenly at me for a moment, hands still up, before she steps back into her room and sits down on her bed. She pats the space beside her.

"Come and tell me what's wrong, Pete."

A laugh bubbles into my chest at the way she treats me like a child, and is kept down only by the heavy realisation that I am very much a child, in this moment, searching for its mother's approval.

I sit down beside her. The bed sinks under my weight and then stills, as the room does, into silence.

“I suppose you’re right,” I tell her, “I believe I was… drawn to visit you, perhaps. For a reason.”

I catch her rolling her eyes, which makes me flare up in indignation. But then she puts a hand on my knee and looks at me. Really looks at me, with a warm smile on her face, and I feel the indignant spark in me sputter and go out.

“Peter, darling, you’ve been pacing the halls outside my room for the past three nights between three and five A.M.”

My mouth opens. And shuts. “How did you—”

“A mother knows when her children are upset. A good mother, anyway.” She pauses, then pats my knee and removes her hand, “If I were to guess, I’d guess that you’ve been on the verge of a panic attack for a good while, now. You know I’m here for you, Pete. You don’t need to be thinking up excuses to come and visit.”

“Well, it wasn’t quite an excuse. I really have lost my—”

“Whatever you say, darling.”

I sigh, heavily. She pats my knee in an indeterminate rhythm until I can speak again, “I know I shouldn’t be here. I know what you must be thinking.”

“And what’s that?”

I lace my hands together and lean my head back to the ceiling, “That you spent hours of your good time setting Juno and I on the right track; that now that we’re together I should be telling him everything. Going to *him* when I am upset.” I hang my head again, “I… don’t know what I can say to redeem myself, only… that I’m afraid, I suppose. Of him, somehow, of what he’d think of me, which doesn’t make sense.”

“Peter, dear,” Buddy says, with a concerned emphasis that makes me look at her, “You do realise you are not confined to having one single confidante. To ask that of anybody would be impossible. Surely you don’t think Juno only talks to you?”

“Of course not,” I say, too quickly. “I’m not an idiot. I know he seeks you out sometimes. And I know he has Rita, and it’s a good thing he does. The two of them have something I’ve always been very jealous of. I’d never interrupt that.”

The steam runs out and I'm left shrugging my shoulders in an utterly pathetic matter and admitting, "It only feels different when it's me, somehow. Juno needs the support — dealing with me can be… difficult. I know that. But I have never once had to *deal with* him, not without good reason, in any case. Giving him my secrets was very much the basis of trust in our relationship, and it took a lot for me to do so. Handing them out to other people feels almost like I'm… well… like I'm…"

"Good God, Ransom, you're asking a friend for advice, not cheating on him."

I grimace.

Buddy sighs, "Let me give you some relationship advice, darling. When I say that two people in a relationship keep things from one another, what does that make you think of?"

I don't quite get her game, but I'll play it for now. "I suppose the answer you're looking for is infidelity," I supply. "Weak foundations, and the like. If you can't tell each other everything…"

"There's the key difference. There's *can't* tell and *don't* tell. If there are things you *can't* say to one another, perhaps because it would end the relationship, or irreparably damage your view of one another, then certainly that speaks to fundamental issues. But darling, you are two people in a relationship, not one entity bound by law to share every thought. You must have your space from one another. Vespa keeps her secrets from me, just as I keep mine from her. It's not the sign of a weak relationship, dear, but the very strongest, to have accurately found the balance between independence and co-dependence."

The irrational urge bubbles in me to lean my head against her shoulder. I might even sway marginally closer. I nod slowly, "You have a point."

"I'm never wrong."

It makes me smile. I've grown very fond of Buddy; her humour, her mannerisms. Despite myself, I find I trust this woman. Completely.

"I suppose," I say, and this stillness is *killing* me, seeping under my bones and making my body feel just *slightly* out of place – like finding one crooked utensil on an otherwise perfectly-laid table. I reach into my pocket and pull out something to play with. It ends up being a kazoo.

I put it to my lips for an experimental *zwee!* and then put it away. I pull out a smiley-face shaped sponge with an abysmal name, still in its packaging. Pamphlets for some inane tourist place on a faraway planet. I pull out—

"Ransom, darling…"

– a hairclip. One of Juno's (perhaps previously one of Rita's), dark green and black marbled together. I click it closed. Then open again. Feel the metal warp in my hands, the initial tension when it gets bent, the release of it when the clasp comes free. I lean forwards with my elbows on my knees and keep clicking it.

"I have been, recently," I begin, "Struck by increasing levels of anxiety pertaining to my identity. The existence of it itself, that is. I'm afraid the usual concerns that arise when *becoming* a person, forming a personality, have evaded me for twenty-odd years. I've been assaulted with destructive impulses at seemingly random times, out of what I believe is some sort of… plot to surprise you all. To prove that I am not who you think I am," I realise it as I speak it. "It… frightens me that all of you know me so intimately. Even…"

"Even Juno?" Buddy prompts.

My throat constricts. I swallow, feel its movement, and nod. "The other day he used my—my name, my birth one, and reached to touch me, and I…" The words die in my throat. I am embarrassed. I shake my head and laugh nervously, "I suppose I hadn't been having a very good day. I snapped at him. I was… for a split instant, ready to do anything possible to never hear that name again." I look at Buddy, guiltily.

Buddy looks back at me. Her hair has been set properly again at some point, so that her mechanical eye isn't on me anymore, but nonetheless her gaze is calculating.

"You need to make a decision, Pete," she says at last. "You're stuck between two phases of your life – the one where you are a nameless mercenary, a product of your own creation, sharp and quick and without empathy; and the one where you are a member of this crew, a human being, a thief, a lover."

She smiles at me and reaches between us to one of the cheap tourist pamphlets. She picks it up and turns it over in her fingers. "The cure to your fear of being known, Peter, is to become acclimatised. I'm afraid it's as simple as that. Force yourself to be known more. Realise

the world doesn't end when you are known. Move on with your life, as a part of this crew." She shrugs and places the pamphlet down again, "Or, if that proves impossible, then your other option is to live life as it was before. Do not stay in the same place. Find a way to keep Juno in your life, or accept that it is impossible, and let him go. But this charade of anonymity in a shared environment only serves to highlight the downsides of both situations."

Buddy leaves me in a moment of silent reflection, and then stands up from the bed suddenly. I almost topple over.

"Let me see if I can find that shirt for you, darling. A second pair of eyes always helps. What did it look like?"

"It was a blouse with a golden corset belt."

"Ah. You know, I might have one just like it myself. I see why it could have ended up here." Her voice becomes more muffled as she sinks deeper into her closet.

I pick up the pamphlet left on the rumpled sheets between us and turn it over in my hands. I almost laugh. I have no idea how, or where, this ended up into my pocket. It's likely I was just trying to look busy in some touristy outpost somewhere and a few of the advertisements I was perusing disappeared into my pockets along the way.

It's yellow. There are two sentences on the top, in two different languages. My eyes skip the garish Solar to the much smaller writing underneath.

'VISIT BEAUTIFUL BRAHMA' it says, 'THE HIDDEN GEM OF THE OUTER RIM. EXPERIENCE FREEDOM.'

"Experience freedom," I mutter out loud.

I put the pamphlet down and stand up. My legs feel weak, and I spend a moment stretching them. I wasn't even sitting that long. I brush aside the rising tide of age-related anxiety and blame it on the more general kind of anxiety instead.

I put my back against the wall just beside the doorjamb of the closet before I speak. "Buddy."

Her voice comes muffled, "Peter."

"I'm going to tell you my name."

There's silence for a moment, in the closet. Then she says, "I want you to know I by no means require your name from you, darling. I understand the gravity of your situation. Many thieves have died trying to live the life that you have. By being known, I didn't mean 'give up your greatest asset'."

"My greatest asset, yes, but also the biggest obstacle between me and complete ownership of my life. When I decided to stay here, I did so because I realised I… envied the chance for growth that all of you had. I want to take that chance, now."

My heartbeat is in my throat. It throbs hard enough that with each beat, a small stab of pain shoots down my neck. My back is pressed hard against the wall as though I half expect the floor to fall away.

"I understand," Buddy says at last. "Well, then. I suppose this next bit is up to you, Pete. Or, I suppose, Not-Pete."

I can hear her shuffling around in her closet. My chest aches. "The Peter bit is right, actually," I tell her.

I feel… punctured. Adrenaline seems to pour out of me all at once, and I find at once my knees too weak to stand. I sink to a squat on the floor, my back against the wall and feet flat on the ground.

"Peter something, then," Buddy says.

"Nureyev," I say back, too fast to think. The word weighs a hundred pounds; with it gone, I feel empty.

With Juno, it had been a lot easier. I'd been so certain about him. I'd also written it down rather than spoken it, which had helped a lot, and I had been stupid and high off the rush of the case, and deeply, wonderfully infatuated. A kiss like that one could make you say anything. Believe anything. (In true love at first sight.) It had been less an admission and more an *e*mission – it had felt natural in the moment.

Buddy hasn't said anything in a while. Just as I realise that, she walks out of the cupboard. She's holding my shirt. She lays it down on the bed, and then turns to me.

She reaches an arm out to pull me up. I take it, although my legs buckle again on the way back up.

Then Buddy smiles and says, "The illustrious Angel of Brahma. I had a

feeling you might've been him."

My vision blacks out.

I don't black out. I hear my voice stuttering some idle fragments as my head recovers from its brief lapse in all function. I feel like a church bell – still ringing after a blow.

Buddy's hands land on me, and she guides me to her bed. After I sit, she instructs me to put my head between my knees and breathe, and I do. A shuttlecraft crash victim. That's what I've been reduced to.

Her hand rubs circles into my back. After some impossible stretch of time, I raise myself just enough to hunch over my knees and glare at the floor. My hair is getting longer; it flops into my peripheral vision.

This is the part where she calls the authorities on me. This is the part where she reveals she grew up on Brahma herself, and has always blamed me for what happened to that Godforsaken planet.

"Sorry, Pete," she says softly.

I laugh bitterly and turn my head away from her. "I haven't been called by… *that* particular moniker… in a long time. I suppose *you'd* have to be the only person left in the galaxy to know about it. What else do you know?"

"Is that a question you honestly want me to answer?" Buddy asks.

"Yes," I answer without thought. "I need to know."

"Well…" Buddy says, "I grew up in the Outer Rim myself, though I'm not Brahmese. I knew about the Guardian Angel System, and what it was capable of. I was… I had a hand in a group of rebels who had a faction that aimed, for a while, to take it down."

I look at her sharply.

"But by the time they got there, it had already been decommissioned." She smiles slowly at me, "By a kid, the rumours went. A skinny, long-haired orphan pickpocket who was the pride and joy of his mentor's eye."

My stomach feels twice as small suddenly. My throat stings with acid. I may be about to throw up.

"You ruffled quite a lot of feathers, you know," she continues. "Some

people admired you. A lot of people thought you were reckless. We all expected you'd be dead within a week."

I laugh again, shortly, "I wasn't an amateur."

"You've proved that," Buddy soothes me. "You spent twenty years under the radar. That's not only impressive, Peter, it's impossible. The moment I heard of you, I knew I wanted to meet you one day. Even work with you. I'm honoured to have the chance now."

"Is that why you picked my application?" a bitter tone seeps into my voice, "You knew who I was from the start?"

"Oh, darling, not at all," Buddy smiles brilliantly at me. "You're a thirty-something year old man, you know, and the Brahmese government redacted everything to do with you apart from what was leaked. Anything to avoid admitting a teenager had outwitted them. I'll admit," she adds, "When I looked into your history, you raised my eyebrows. Complete anonymity, coupled with a few big names on your list of previous heists – you certainly fit the profile for a runaway revolutionary."

I don't feel right. I'm still half expecting someone to burst in the door any moment to take me away. "I hope you'll understand my decision not to tell anybody else at this time. You realise it's vital to my safety that as few people know my name as possible. I told Juno because I love him, and you because I respect you, but the others…"

"It's not my secret to tell. I will not treat it lightly, Pete," Buddy reassures me. "Though, if you're willing – and only if you're willing, Pete… I'd like to have coffee with you one time. I'm very curious as to what happened that day."

(Don 't walk away from me!)

My palms are sweating. I haven't thought about that day in a long, long time — it lies at the back of my mind, the first file the bottom of the first in a long, long aisle of metaphorical cabinets. "Did you know him?" I ask. My voice comes out scratched, "My mentor."

"Mag?"

I flinch.

"I met him once, thirty years ago," Buddy continues, as though she hadn't seen me react at all. "Before you. Or maybe with you, when

you were very, very young. It's hard to remember. Thirty years is a long time, and I wouldn't have committed every starving street urchin I met to memory. Either way, it barely counted as a meeting. He was a rebel like us, at the time, and not at all remarkable, if you don't mind me saying. Next I heard of him, something had changed, and he'd branched out on his own. Thought he had a better plan. I suppose that plan was you."

I chew on my lip. "Did they ever tell you how he died?"

"Nobody ever knew. They rumoured he was taken by a guard while breaking into the Guardian Angel System. I'm sorry, Pete," she adds, running her hand over my knee again, "I know you must be desperate to find out. I know that feeling. Wanting to find the person who did it and make them hurt as much as possible."

I laugh softly, "Oh, for a while I did. But no. Not anymore." Not anymore. When I sit up properly, I become aware of myself as though from a distance. Ah — it turns out some symptoms of anxiety are harder to simply will away than others. Or perhaps I'm getting weaker. Such are the costs of being a person.

What would she think of me if she knew what happened to the last family I had?

"Would you like me to get Juno?" she asks. Concern is evident in her voice.

"Perhaps you…" I say quietly, before I'm cut off. My throat clogs with age-old impulses — to push her away and request I be left alone to take care of my oncoming fit of vulnerability in peace.

Buddy's hand lands on my back. The lump in my throat melts away into a strangled noise, and without thinking, I fall into her shoulder.

"Oh, Pete," she says quietly, soothingly, trying to make the best out of a bad angle and comfort me. "It's alright, darling. You're one of us, now. I won't let anything happen to you. You're safe here." She presses her head into my hair for a moment, and then says, lowly, "I suppose it's been a while since someone assured you of that, hasn't it?"

I don't know what to say to that. I don't know how to tell her her trust is misjudged, that I'm not deserving of a family again, no matter how her words and her comfort makes me ache a yearning feeling I've folded away for years.

I lean on her until I get a hold of myself, and then, with a deep breath, I sit up straight. I'm not quite back in my body, yet, but I know how to hide it well enough by now.

"Feeling better, Pete?" she asks.

"Much," I turn to face her with a wry smile, and decide the problem of *Mag* is one that requires no discussion, at least not for the moment. "I hope you'll excuse me, Captain Aurinko, but I'll have to take a raincheck on having another heart-to-heart any time soon. Like you said yourself: sometimes, keeping secrets is essential to a good relationship."

Buddy raises an eyebrow, "How appropriately dramatic of you. Alright, then, Peter. I'll leave you to your secrets. Take your shirt with you," she adds, as I stand up.

I make it to the door before she says, "Pete."

I hesitate. I can't quite convince myself to turn around.

"Your past, and whatever you may think of it, is irrelevant to me. The Peter Nureyev," she pauses for a moment when I flinch at the name, "aboard my crew is a beautiful young man, and not just outwardly so. He is a member of this team, and someone I'm rather fond of, if I may say so."

She sighs, "I can't make your decisions for you, darling. But for my penny's worth, I hope to have the chance to get to know you, one day."

She says no more. I wait a moment, in the doorframe, and then slip back into the halls of the Blanche, letting myself wander aimlessly down the halls, knowing inevitably that my journey will find myself at Juno's door.

Chapter End Notes

> a bigger chapter than usual! i like this one. if you liked it too... let me know ! your comments are food for my soul

Juno & Vespa: Not so Alone

Chapter Summary

In which Vespa scares herself away.

Chapter Notes

TWs: panic attacks, references to abuse (references to vespa's dad, sarah, but not in detail), a few auditory hallucinations, Not Serious Knife Threats(TM).

also i'd like to clarify smth very important to me: vespa is NOT threatening/intimidating bc of her psychosis. she's threatening bc she trained as an assassin, so she has Knife Instincts, and is scared a lot of the time due to her struggle with trust. none of her threats in anything i ever write her in are serious, unless like. theyre against a bad guy. i feel like thats already pretty clear but yanno. just so ppl kno what im about.

art in this chapter is by sarcasm!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Today is what Buddy would tell me is a *bad brain day*.

She uses that term for when I'm at my twitchiest; when every small sound has me spiralling into thoughts of intruders and betrayal. Being conscious of it helps, lets me rationalise some of what I think and why, but it doesn't make the thoughts stop. The thoughts or the voices.

I know my whole thing is trust. I'm working on it – Buddy and I, we're working on it, together. I don't *like* not trusting. I'm sick of being afraid of the people I live with, of feeling alone and feeling on-edge every time I'm in a room with one of them alone.

Buddy tells me I should pay attention to the way they are around each other – look at Ransom, Juno, and Rita, the way they talk, the simple ways in which they show effortless trust towards the others on our ship, enthusiasm towards helping the rest of us out.

It might work for Rita, especially since she's so close to Jet. I can't see her turning on him, even if she turns on us. But it doesn't help with that slippery bastard, *especially* not since he started macking on the

only person on the ship I trust less than him: Juno Steel.

The two of them are a disaster waiting to happen, I know it. Either they're going to have a messy breakup and Ransom is going to tear this spacecraft apart out of revenge, or the two of them are going to decide to go solo, and turn the rest of us in. It's what comes of love like that — too much passion too soon. Love like that only ends tragically.

Bad brain day, I tell myself. *Just a bad brain day.*

I'm halfway to the kitchen when I hear a sound and stop silent. There's rustling, and when I whirl around to face it, drawing my knife, I see a storage room door open.

Just like I was saying. Just like I've been *trying* to tell Buddy. There's no room for trust here. Whoever this is, they're going to have less than two seconds to explain themselves to my knife before they get it through the throat.

I kick the door open. It slams back against the wall and the figure inside jumps out of their skin.

"Of course it's *you*," I snarl. A few steps and I have Juno up against the wall, my knife at his pretty little throat. "What was it? *Huh?* What are you trying to steal?"

Juno's breath rasps. In the dim light from the door I see tracks of tears on his face, and his pupils are blown. I step back from him and he slumps to the ground.

I flick on the light. He looks fuck awful. He's shaking slightly, huddled in on himself and staring up at me like he's not quite sure who I am.

I know his history. I know what this is, and if I'm right, then the next time we stop anywhere, Juno Steel is getting an official termination.

I drop to my knees in front of him. "What have you taken?" I snarl.

"Taken?" he asks, and then he dawns with comprehension. His distant eyes sharpen on me for a second and he frowns, "Jesus, Vespa, I'm not coming down off a high. I'm having a fucking panic attack."

Oh. That makes sense. If I can believe him. Juno shudders and draws his arms back into himself. "Jesus," he mutters again.

I lean back on my knees and eye him over. “This happen often?”

“Used to. Not this bad. Not in a while,” Juno leans his head back against the wall, “I didn’t—stupid fucking dark room. Reminded me of hiding from Ma, I…” his whole body shakes. “I don’t know,” he says. His voice sounds very quiet.

Hiding from Ma.

I don’t know much of Steel’s past. There’s something I stand for, though, something a life-long war waged in my own head with my own past has drilled into me, and that’s that nobody – *nobody* – should ever fuck around with kids.

So you’re running off with some girl? Good luck to you. You think you won’t end up just like me? You can run from my words, but you’ll always be an Ilkay, Vespa. *You can’t outrun yourself.*

I push the voice of a dead man out of my mind, digging my nails into my own palm to bring me back into this room, where I’m needed. “Steel,” I tell him. “Tell me what’s going on. Why were you in here?”

“I…” Juno swallows, his neck bobbing with the movement, “broken pipe in Rita’s bathroom, was looking for a spanner.”

“She know you’re in here?”

Juno draws in a sudden, shaking breath, and buries his head into his knees. “Vespa, I— I can’t breathe. I can’t— I can’t breathe, Vespa,” he flings himself back against the wall suddenly, “Fuck— *do* something.”

He could be tricking me, my brain reminds me. Trying to get me close so that he can grab me and lock me in here while he does whatever his plan has to be. I could always knock him out, that’d reset his breathing, give me time to regain control of myself, because I can feel myself slipping, too.

Buddy, please. I can’t breathe— it’s the poisoning, Buddy, help, please, please!

I’ve spent a fair share of my own time in dark corners begging for help from people who just watched me struggle.

No, no, no, wait, you ’re— not real. You’re not real, none of this is real, I can’t breathe, I can’t—

“Okay. Listen to me, Steel,” I lean forward to put one hand on Juno’s shoulder. With the other hand I grab his and press it to my stomach. It feels wrong, it’s all wrong. I don’t like having his hands on me and I don’t like being this close. “Hey,” I snap, “Concentrate. Breathe with me.”

“I can’t—I can’t,” Juno gasps, “Vespa, I need— medicine or something, please.”

“You said it yourself, this is a panic attack. You know how this shit works. Focus, ground yourself, concentrate, and it’ll go away,” I growl. He isn’t focusing on me so I put my other hand on his stomach and press in. “Come on, Juno,” I try, quieter. “Match my breathing.”

Juno’s eyes find my face at last. His Adam’s apple bobs as he nods hesitantly, and then takes in a loud, rattling breath. He manages to hold it for about half as long as he should, and then he lets it out again.

“You can do better than that,” I snarl.

“Yeah, being fucking criticised is really calming, Vespa,” he spits back at me.

I narrow my eyes. He doesn’t make me want to be particularly kind when he talks like that.

Juno’s breathing goes uneven again as he begins to cry. He leans his head back against the wall, “Fuck. This is so humiliating.”

“Hey, listen to me, no it’s not.”

Juno looks up at me like I’ve just grown a third eye, and to be honest, I’m feeling a little the same. It’s a bit nauseating, actually. But his crying slows, and so I clear my throat and shuffle a little closer on my knees, “Nothing embarrassing about this, Steel. Happens to the best of us.”

Juno breathes in deeply and then nods at me. He pushes himself up against the wall until he’s straight-backed and wipes his eyes. “I thought I was over this,” he admits.

“You are,” I tell him. “Listen to me: this shit doesn’t own you. You get to decide who gets to fuck with you, Steel, and that means yourself too. Don’t take any shit.”

Juno laughs with a watery voice. A big tear wells in the corner of his eye and when he blinks it falls down his face, “I can’t help it.”

“Sometimes it can’t be helped,” I tell him. “That’s not the same thing. You don’t *stop* having attacks, you learn how to deal with them. How to make sure they don’t own you.”

“I…” I try again after a while, “It takes strong people to survive like we do. It takes stronger people to start to try to move past it, live around it. I had to. You have to, too. And it starts with this, with breathing with me.”

Juno nods again, and he moves his hand so that it’s pressed flat against my stomach. After a moment, he begins to breathe.

It’s shaky at first, he breaks out of it a few times. I keep one of my hands on his stomach and the other over his hand on my stomach. He closes his eye.

The only sounds are the deep, rumbling hum of the ship’s engines, and Juno’s breathing. We stay locked in this strange embrace for what feels like hours as his breathing steadies, and then slows. I could stab him like this, I realise. I could kill him so easily. I could do anything to him, and yet… here he is. Tears still leak from his eye and the bottom of his eyepatch, but they’re less hysterical. He’s not afraid of me.

Eventually I feel like he’s calmed down enough. “Steel,” I say quietly. He opens his eye to look at me.

“Can you keep this up while I get something to help?”

Juno nods. I curl my hand over his on my stomach and peel it off of me, putting it on his own stomach, “Follow your breathing,” I instruct him. “Focus on where you can feel it entering your body, how you feel it filling you up, how it leaves you. Keep time. I’ll be back.”

Then I stand up. My knees ache from the hard metal floor. Juno is slumped back between the boxes, and his eye stays on me until I’m at the door.

“Please come back,” he breathes, just as I step through the threshold.

I don’t answer him. That kid trusts too easily. It makes me uncomfortable.

The kitchen isn't too far away. I can hear a whining sound coming from it, and the source of it becomes painfully clear when I walk through the door and something small and very pink accosts me.

"Miss Vespa! You gotta help, Mistah Steel went missin' and I can't find him anywhere and he left to get something to fix my pipes only Jet already came in and fixed them and it turns out they weren't even that broken just clogged cause you can't put crackers down this drain for some reason which don't make sense cause how else are you meant to feed the rabbits but I guess there ain't no rabbits on this ship which makes a lot more sense and— Oh, Miss Vespa, I'm so worried about Juno!"

I could tell her. He's just down the corridor. I could send her on her way and he wouldn't be my problem anymore.

Rita peers up at me with big, teary eyes underneath her weird-framed glasses and star-shaped glitter on her cheeks.

I don't trust her with him. A loud interruption could shake up his breathing, and anyway, I'm the doctor aboard this ship. He's my patient. I'm seeing this through.

"Try the corridors on Ransom's side of the ship. He probably ditched you to get into his quarters."

Rita's eyes widen and her mouth opens. "He wouldn't!" she gasps, and she looks… actually hurt. "You take that back, Miss Vespa, Juno's a decent lady and he wouldn't ditch me like that. Ooooh!" she grumbles, "I'll forgive you on accounta not knowin' him well enough."

Then she turns on her tiny little heel and walks out.

That was easy enough. I watch her skirt dip from side to side as she walks, and I feel something in my chest. Something like regret.

Probably just because I'm already regretting not just letting her handle it. I've made some stupid decisions, but having Juno Steel on my hands and *not* washing him off of them as soon as possible is maybe the stupidest. I should just leave him there.

Please come back.

I find the tea. Make two cups. Carry it back.

"What is it with you people and your obsession with *tea*?" Juno asks

when I walk in, after he flinches and I have to remind him who I am.

“It’s lavender,” I tell him, putting the mug down on a box of spare parts beside him. He stares blankly at me, and then shrugs his shoulders and shakes his head slightly.

“Moron,” I sit down across from him, nursing my own tea in my hands until it almost burns. “Lavender is good for anxiety. And even if it’s not, a hot, flavoured drink definitely is. So drink it. This stuff isn’t cheap, Steel, and it happens to be my favourite.”

“Right,” Juno eyes his cup of tea and wrinkles his nose, “Cool.”

We sit in silence. It’s… not the worst time I’ve ever spent with him. He’s better when he’s not talking. I can focus on the rumbling of the engine and the tea in my hands and not on the warmth where our legs barely touch when I stretch one out.

Until he starts *slurping* his tea like some kind of feral animal. The seconds of silence in between make it worse than it would be if it was just a constant sound. I’m right at my limit when Juno puts the tea down.

“Thank you,” he says, very quietly.

My irritation subsides. He’s looking at me all puppy dog-eyed, which makes him look dumb. I lean back on my arm and roll my eyes at him, “Whatever.”

[image]

“I guess,” Juno looks down at his knees and then up at me, “I just have a… complicated relationship with small dark rooms. When I was a kid, I—”

“Kid,” I interrupt. Juno looks at me quizzically.

“…Yeah? That’s— are you calling me *kid?*”

“Just listen— Not to quote Jet at you, Steel, and I’m glad you’re— getting comfortable with opening up about your backstory or whatever the fuck is about to happen, but *trust me*. We are *not* there yet.”

Juno frowns at me. “*Kid*?”

“Oh, quit it. I’ll call you kid if I want.”

"I'm *forty.*"

"I am aware."

Juno grumbles and leans against the wall again. "Fine," he acquiesces. "No backstories."

I feel something tug in me. It's the same feeling as before in the kitchen. Like fishing line in my heart.

"You should… talk to someone though," my wrist is resting on my knee and I wave my hand with a certain imbued disinterest, "You're… close to Rita. I'm sure she'd want to hear if there's something on your mind."

Juno contemplates this for a moment, then nods, "Yeah. Yeah, you're right. I'll go talk to her."

I feel the tug of the fishing line lessen. All this vulnerability, people spilling their guts out at my feet, makes me upset. It's wrong. It's not how people should be. Not if they want to keep safe. I don't know how to feel about them feeling safe around me.

"You feeling any better?"

Juno nods. "Yeah. Way better." He shifts around for a moment and pulls himself up against the wall. "I… owe you an apology."

I snort, "Save your breath."

"No, really. I… know I'm not… your favourite person on this ship. It means a lot to me that you'd be this kind, especially after everything I've… done to upset you. You know, you're really a very kind—Jesus Christ!"

In two seconds flat I have my knife pointed at him, and his hands are flat against the wall, "Fuck!"

"You say a *word* about this," I tell him, "To anybody else aboard this ship, and I will write your obituary myself, with this knife. *Nobody* hears about this, you hear me, Steel?"

"Got it," Juno wheezes.

I stumble back from him and get to my feet. Something is crawling in my skin and I can't take it. His fucking eye. Wide. Frightened. Afraid of me.

Well, good. I don't trust Juno Steel and I sure as hell don't want him to be trusting me. That's when people let up their guard. That's when people fall apart.

"Fuck this," I spit on the floor, and walk out of the room.

I think I hear him say *please come back.* For a second. But I know how to differentiate what I really hear and what I just think I do by now, so my boots only stumble for a second on the metal as I stalk back down the hall.

We do our stop-off at the markets on some flea-bitten asteroid and it goes off without a hitch. My interaction with Juno has all but faded from my mind until I hear the knock.

I think I'm hallucinating it, at first. My hallucinations come and go and they're worse when I'm tired. I lay in bed and watch the sheets rise and fall over Buddy's shoulders and try to wait it out.

It's when I'm watching her and they *don't* stop that I know they're real. Buddy can make anything go away.

The knocking stops and instead there's just some shuffling. My hand's on the handle of my knife before I'm even all the way out of bed. I keep the lights off. When I make it to the door I stand there until the coolness of the metal has seeped right into my skin. My heart beats in my ears. I'm ready for anything.

The door slides open at the same time as my knife arm raises.

I'm ready for any number of attackers, vandals, masked bandits, assassins. I swing my knife arm into empty air.

I'm not ready for a box.

Wrapped, too. In light purple paper with a bow in string. One half of the bow is curled in that way you can do with ribbon and a blade, the other is frayed like the person who wrapped it tilted the blade a bit too far.

The card on it has my name.

It could be a trap. Can't be too careful. I sink to my knees and press my ear against the cardboard. There's no ticking, no movement from within that I can sense. When I pick it up, something heavy slides and

something crinkles.

I put the box down again and then press my knife against it.

The cardboard peels back easily. I pull it apart slowly, in case I need to throw it. The first thing that hits me is the smell. I catch a glimpse of purple tissue paper and my curiosity finally gets the better of me. I rip it open.

Tea. The expensive kind, in a black tin with golden writing in an ancient, ancient language. I run my finger over the flowing characters before I raise the tin to my nose and breathe in. Lavender.

This would've cost him a lot. Two paychecks, maybe.

It makes me feel… afraid.

"Vespa, dear?" comes a croaking voice from the bed, before I have time to process that emotion. A hundred different thoughts are building in my head, starting slow and then gaining in speed and severity, like the first rain of a wet season.

"I'm here," I reply, and stuff the tin back into its box. I get up and close the door behind me, plunging us back into safe darkness. Can't be known in a darkness like this.

"What have you got?" Buddy asks when she hears the rustling of tissue paper in my hands.

"It's nothing," I say shortly. I open my cupboard and shove it away. Somewhere deep, under layers of clothes, where I won't have to look at it or feel that way again.

"It's not like you to keep secrets."

I sigh. The bed creaks when I climb back into it, "I'm sorry. It's—"

"I said it's not like you to keep secrets, dear. I didn't say you couldn't have some." In the dark, I can just make out the edge of Buddy's smile, "We're all entitled to privacy, Vespa."

You get privacy in a darkness like this. You don't have to be seen swallowing down the tears in your throat as you pull the blankets up around your shoulders. "Thanks, Bud."

She leans over to kiss my forehead. I kiss her cheek, and then, after a moment of fumbling in the dark, our lips meet.

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with the two near-empty cups of lavender tea I found in the storage room along with Juno’s keys, would it, dear?”

Look. I owe Buddy a lot of things. My life being the simplest one of them. But I don’t think I owe her the satisfaction of believing that her *crime family* deal is really going to work. “You know too goddamn much,” I growl at her, and she laughs.

“I sure hope not. Life would be incredibly boring if that were true.”

“Whatever,” is all I manage to say, among the fluster of her arms pulling me closer and her lips on the back of my shoulder.

“It’s okay,” Buddy says to me as she settles down, looping an arm around my waist, “I promise not to tell anybody that you’re going soft.”

And she laughs, and loosens her arm on me so I can turn around and get her to shut the hell up with a kiss.

Chapter End Notes

owo.....? spare comment, ma'am? sir? anyone?

Rita & Peter: The Shovel Talk

Chapter Summary

In which Rita is actually pretty scary sometimes.

Chapter Notes

You asked, I delivered! With 69% of the vote, exactly -- nice -- y'all voted for tonight's chapter to be Peter & Rita! And you're in luck, cause y'all voted for the chapter with the next piece of art!!!

Art in this chapter is by Wolfy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I am… so tired.

Out of all the difficult things I have done, spending the last few months upon the Carte Blanche has been, perhaps, the most difficult.

I have gone from being unknown to the universe, to having five other people know me intimately enough to repeatedly strip me to my barest bones. I have been called out for my general uselessness aboard the ship, discovered I am apparently nowhere near as subtle with my emotions as I might think, and had my thoughts and feelings rubbed raw by Buddy Aurinko's sharp eyes and sharper tongue almost constantly.

It's only gotten worse since Captain Aurinko learnt my name. She's quick enough to defend me when the topic of Brahma arises in any context that I suspect the others know at least that I am connected to the planet somewhat. She also tends to… dig for details that I'd rather stay buried, when we are alone, which means I tend to do what I can to *not* end up alone with her. She is an intelligent woman, but also uncontrollably curious, as I have learned.

I gave her permission to tell Vespa, some time ago, and now the way Vespa looks at me has changed. There's less outward disgust, but a different quality to the way I catch her looking at me, as though she is evaluating me, attempting to match the person she sees and the things she now knows I am capable of, and figure out where along that sliding scale my true self lies. It… is a puzzle I'd rather she doesn't crack, at least not before I do.

Jet— is an enigma. I won't even start upon the subject, for fear I'll spend another night endlessly frustrated over the whole situation.

Needless to say, I find myself exhausted and weary of it all at the best of times. I find it necessary to spend time alone, or with the only two stables in my life. One of those has been Juno, patient as ever to stand by my side and work with me through my weaker moments. I love him dearly, and the comfort he provides me makes everything else almost completely bearable.

But Juno is planet-side at the moment, on a mission with Buddy, and that means I have to rely on my other stable.

"I'm sorry to have to do this to you," I say, as Rita pulls me into her room, "I've had a hard few weeks, and what with Juno not available right now—"

"You ain't gotta apologise for nothin', Mistah Ransom! I like spendin' time with you and I've been meanin' to chat with you anyways." Rita plonks me forcefully down on the end of her bed. Somehow, she managed not only to get the largest room on the ship, but decorate it all over in pink. There's a huge vanity mirror/interactive monitor screen with lightbulbs circling the top like something from an ancient Earthen movie, on which is laid no less than six boxes of assorted makeup and snack essentials.

"How did you get this on the ship?" I ask.

"Same way anyone gets anything on the ship, silly," Rita says as she totters around her room, gathering supplies. That's not what I mean, but I decide to let it slide. I don't think I'll get any answer more revealing than that.

"You said you were… meaning to talk to me?"

"Now ain't the time for that just yet," Rita waves me off with a hand, "We gotta watch a stream first." She leans forward and taps the vanity. The mirror surface warbles and disappears, replaced by a selection of movies. "What do you wanna watch?"

I think for a moment, "We could watch Saturnian Safecrackers again."

She wrinkles her nose, "I ain't like watching those movies about Mistah Jet now that I know him. It just ain't entertaining anymore! Nope, I got one!" She reaches out and taps a movie title. I squint at the description.

“Is this a romance stream?”

“Romance *comedy*, Mistah Ransom, please. You like those weird chips, don’tcha?”

“There’s nothing weird about chives and sour cream. Nothing weirder than salmon flavour, anyway.”

“If you wanna say so, Mistah Ransom, I won’t let you know how wrong you are,” Rita flips open a lid of a box on her vanity and pulls out a green packet which she throws at me, and starts raiding through the boxes to find whatever she’s going to be occupying her mouth and hands with for the next two-or-so hours. “Get comfy!”

I scoot backwards on the bed until I’m against her headboard, which, for the record, has been decorated with plastic roses. Roses that had *previously* been on *somebody else’s* bed, but when that somebody else’s significant other had walked into the bedroom and started snort-laughing until he could hardly stand, they were handed off to whoever wanted them.

She has huge cushions in the shapes of sushi rolls, puppies, and shrimp, and I use a sushi roll to protect my back from the hard headboard while I hug a puppy cushion to my chest.

“Aaaalrighty!” Rita hits play on the vanity mirror comms, leaps up onto the bed beside me as fast as she can to watch the movie begin.

She sidles up to me. I stretch my legs out in front of me, bend my knees, and scoot down so that I’m low enough to rest my head on her shoulder.

The movie starts in the same cliche way that most romance (pardon — romance *comedy*) streams do. Let me summarise: girl meets girl, in some mundane way, (in this case the ruins of New Massawa on Asmara during the midst of its anti-fascist uprising in the late twenty-third century). They note the other as the only remarkable thing in their ordinary surroundings, but then both move on and forget their chance meeting. This goes on, until the political conflict comes to a maximum, and, having both been drafted to either the war or the rebellion movement, they meet in the middle of a battle and share a night of extreme passion. It’s the standard formula.

Rita giggles all the way through the sex scene, her face bright red, and comments things like “ooh, ain’t this *steamy*, Mistah Ransom?”.

I can't say I find it incredibly arousing myself, and the acting's a little off, but there's a certain depth to the intimacy the two characters share that has my breath catch in my chest.

The pair share soft love declarations, kept sacred between them, the pillows, and the nervous smile he gives you when he says 'that makes two of us', the one you interpret for breathless exhilaration when you should've seen the fear written into every corner of his face.

I'm distracted.

"Ain't that so sweet, Mistah Ransom? Mistah Ransom, oh no! Don't cry!"

I touch my face and find it wet. I wipe my eyes quickly and glance away from Rita, "Sorry, I—"

"Oh no, I'm sorry! Do you want me to turn it off?" Rita gets some tissues from somewhere and presses them into my hands.

"No, no, that's fine," I dab at my eyes and hope my makeup hasn't smudged too much, "It's just… touching. They've really captured just… just how it feels."

Rita looks at me from the side of her eyes, her red lips pursed. She's a smart woman, I know, and I'm sure Juno's told her everything. It's not unreasonable to think she's pieced it all together, exactly how I *relate,* as much as that idea mortifies me. I hadn't realised how close she and Juno were when we met originally. Sure, the research I did on him implied they'd been working together a long time, but the stories Juno has told me since then — of the comedowns from experimental drugs spent in her bathtub when he could make it to her, or the times she found him at the foot of her building passed out on the times when he couldn't quite – I had never expected.

During that time, Juno has told me, he was selfish and demanding, taking people's pity and gestures of goodwill and only using it to further justify his self-destructive behaviour.

"You don't get it, Nureyev," Juno muttered to me one night, our hands intertwined in the blankets and all the lights off, *"I did everything I could to push everyone away. I wanted everybody to believe I was beyond helping, to just give up on me already so I finally could, too. And everybody did— except her. She was the only one that refused. The only one that believed I was still a good person, somewhere. You don't understand. I'd be dead. I would be dead right now, if it wasn't for that*

belief."

"I'm sorry, Rita."

Rita keeps looking at me unflinchingly. Her hands fold in her lap, and then she glances away, "Well, that's silly. Ain't nothin' for you to be sorry for, Mistah Ransom. s'far as I know."

"That's not true, and I think you know it. I owe you an apology. One I should've given you a while ago, now."

The movie plays on the screen, unnoticed by either of us.

"I'm sorry for frightening you, and for doing so wrong by you."

Rita looks at me. Her eyes are soft, but they're looking right into me, from behind her ridiculous purple frames with the diamantes lining them. "You ain't doin' wrong by me," she says softly.

"Perhaps not presently, but I did. I tried to take Juno from you. Worse, I lead him into dangerous situations even when the signs of his mental health struggle were obvious. I romanticised them, even, considering them a part of his appeal, and that was wrong of me on a very personal level. But I was even more wrong when I tried to get him to leave with me." I sigh, "You must understand, Rita, that I am not a good person. I was selfish, and I realise now that to take him from Hyperion City would have likely caused him irreparable harm. Even the attempt did. And I owe you an apology for ever hurting him, and for ever causing you reason to be scared on his behalf."

Rita's eyes are still on me. She puts a hand on my arm and says, "You're a good person, Mistah Ransom. I can tell that about you. You just gotta learn how to let it out, is all."

"You know what she used to say to me? She used to say 'Mistah Steel—' don't laugh! It's a good impression, shut up— 'Mistah Steel, you're a good person. You just gotta learn how to let it out, is all'. Fuck, Nureyev… there are times where those words saved my life."

It occurs to me that I'm looking at one of the most precious treasures of the universe, and she has freely given me perhaps the greatest score of my life, because what I'm experiencing cannot be stolen — never has been, and never will be — but must earned. And I've earnt it, myself, somehow.

"You still haven't responded to my apology."

Rita smiles at me, “I was a lil mad at first, I ain’t gonna lie, when Mistah Steel told me what happened between you two. But that wasn’t until I asked him after that case with the globe, and by then I saw the way you and Mistah Steel was lookin’ at each other, and plus Mistah Steel seems so, so so so happy, really, and he tells me everything so I *know* you ain’t up to anything sneaky with him, and I know he’s the kind of lady who could say no to things now, and I think he can make his own decisions. So I stopped bein’ mad and started bein’ your friend instead!”

As usual for when Rita gets on a roll like that, I’m hit in the metaphorical face by twenty different tangents I want to follow up on, and they all flounder around in my head until one falls out of my mouth, “He tells you everything? What does he say about me?”

“Oh!” Rita goes bright red and snorts, and then giggles, “Only that you’re real dreamy. And a great kisser, and he tries to tell me you’re real good in bed only I don’t wanna hear about my own boss’s sex life, especially because once I was worried Mistah Steel was gettin’ back into some things that ain’t good for his health, so I looked in his search history, and now I ain’t ever want to hear a single word from him again on the topic of *that.* But most of all, he tells me that he really, really likes you, Mistah Ransom. Which makes me remember what I wanted to talk about when you came in here!”

I’ve gone from feeling sad, to profoundly humbled, to light and dizzy with happiness all in the span of what feels like twenty seconds. Considering the highly emotional nature of my last few months, it would be almost too much to bear, but luckily I’m so made stupidly giddy with the knowledge that Juno talks about me like that that I feel I could handle anything right now, “And what was that?”

Rita leans over the side of the bed and pulls out a huge folder. She slams it down on the bed between us and pats the top of it, “I’m super happy for you and Mistah Steel, really! Mistah Steel is my best friend in the whole universe, even more than Frannie, but don’t tell her that — she doesn’t think Mistah Steel is real anyway, but that means I gotta make sure Mistah Steel is gonna stay happy, you know?”

Why can I feel my stomach sinking…?

“So, I did some research,” Rita reaches into a packet of chips with one hand and pulls the rubber band off her folder with the other. “You gotta understand, Mistah Steel ain’t always been so good at pickin’ his datemates, so I made it a habit a while ago to look into ‘em. It was a

little harder with you!"

"A little…" My shoulders slump, "So, then…"

"But with a little persistence anythin' is possible!" she flips open the file. "So here's you, right?" she points to a picture I haven't seen in twenty years. "You was cute with long hair, Mistah— well, I ain't gonna use your real name, not for now, you see."

She flips through the folder. I catch a glimpse of news clippings, a census record — she might *actually* have my birth certificate in there, a document I've never laid eyes on and have sworn never to search for, lest the curiosity to discover the true story of my origin overtakes me. She stops on a picture of the Guardian Angel System, and looks up at me.

Without moving her painted nail from the middle of the photo, she says, "You know, I can't believe they never made a movie out of you. A teen like you, taking down a whole oppressive government system like that? That's prime stream material! You could be famous, Mistah Ransom!" — she does not blink while she says this — "Real famous."

I swallow.

"But oh well!" she sighs and flips the folder shut, pulling the rubber band over it, "You're real nice to Mistah Steel and all, and I can't see you ever causin' him any kind of heartbreak. In fact, if things ever didn't work out, I can see you endin' things real respectful and gentle like! And as long as there ain't no problems, sendin' that story to my movie-maker friends on Mars would just make *everybody*'s attention be on you and Mistah Steel, and he'd hate me for that. So this lil folder or any of the twenty copies I got elsewhere ain't got no reason to go anywhere! Ain't that right, Mistah Ransom?"

"I hear you loud and clear," I say, and wonder idly if this is the kind of thing that having friends usually leads to, or if I really have just landed on the ship of the six biggest oddballs in the known universe (myself included).

"Great!" Rita pops the file back underneath her bed, "Now, lemme braid your hair!"

In somewhat of a daze, I maneuver myself to lie with my head in her lap, while she pulls at my hair and starts twisting it into small braids. I can't believe she undid twenty years of hard work in just one research session, probably undertaken in between binging streams and eating

snacks. If it's that easy to do… who else has by now? The ship feels small around me again. How many other people out there know things, could find things?

"Oh, I forgot to mention," Rita shakes me out of my daze several braids later, "I was a little worried about findin' your information as easily as I did, so I took a few preventative measures."

"Pardon?"

"Those twenty copies I got are the last ones," Rita says, "I scrubbed your records clean. I can't have Mistah Steel's gentleman friend gettin' arrested for bein' a terrorist, after all! Plus, I'm real fond of ya, Mistah Ransom, and I'd be sad too if anybody took you away. Even if the Outer Rim put a bounty on your head that had more digits than my fingers!"

The relief… is incomparable. I sit up and turn around in her arms to kiss her cheek "Rita, you are a gem."

"It ain't no problem," I can hear the smile in her voice, and she pats the side of my face fondly. Then her voice changes again a little bit, and the smile in it disappears. "There are some… really interesting things in there, Mistah Ransom. About your family. If you… ever wanted to have a look through them…"

"Thank you, Rita, but that's alright." I turn back and lay back down in her lap again. She continues braiding my hair, "Some things… I don't feel I was meant to know. In some ways, it's been something of a gift to be able to find myself on my own. If I found out who they were now… I'm afraid it would change everything."

"I understand," Rita says.

The truth is, the thought terrifies me to the point of physical nausea. Having my hands poised over a chance to open my own history and fill the gaps that have been within me for so long, and not being able to decide whether or not to take it. The scholar within me and the sentimental, daydream-prone boy who always wished for a family both want to tear their hair out when I think of walking away and leaving those gaps unfilled. The thief in me and the scared seventeen year old in me both know that those gaps have kept me the blank slate that's allowed me to survive for my whole life.

But the truth exists whether I like it or not. Whether I know the facts of my history or not, they live within me somewhere, and perhaps

trying to deny them is only delaying my fully realised future.

But… there are also the facts of who I currently am. Someone who is Rita's friend and Juno's lover and Buddy and Vespa's crewmember and Jet's admirer, and perhaps even, somebody who is learning to like themselves as they are, no masks required. Perhaps this now is just as much my truth as that past.

"Rita?" I crane my head back to look at her.

"Yeah?"

"You can call me Nureyev, if you like."

Rita smiles back down at me and pats my face again, "Thanks, Mistah Nureyev. You're real sweet, you know that? I was a little scared'a'ya at first, since you're so sharp an' all, but you ain't so scary at all."

I think for a moment, staring vacantly past Rita up to the ceiling. "No," I say at last, "No, I don't think I am. Or at least, I think I've decided I'd like not to be. Thank you, Rita."

[image]

Chapter End Notes

y'all know the drill.... ⬇

Buddy & Juno: I'm Good on the Family Thing, Actually.

Chapter Summary

In which Juno finds out he's still got it.

Chapter Notes

an hour late, oops!! i was being a cryptid in a forest at 10pm and got home late.

TWs: mention of sarah.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The smell of laser blast is filling the room, sulphuric smoke curling around the floor and up towards the little exhaust fan in the ceiling, which is making an unhealthy-sounding whirring sound as it tries to keep up.

It's the training gym, or the makeshift room we turned into one. At the moment, it's the shooting range, a black-ringed target printed and pinned against the wall. Laser fire can't pass through the metal, but it sure as hell can leave smoking blackened dents in it. There are currently more of those than I'd like in the immediate area around the target, which is any at all.

Buddy stands up from one of the two chairs by the wall. She's in pants that are somehow baggy and fashionable at the same time, and a cropped turtleneck in her signature red, "How long has it been since you held a blaster?"

"That's kind of a personal question to ask a lady, don't you think?"

"Juno."

I roll my eyes and put the blaster back into its holster on my hip. It's clunky and doesn't fit me well. A fucking training holster. That's me: Juno Steel, the most skilled sharpshooter on Mars, if not the wider universe, using a *training* holster. "I know what I'm doing."

"Is that so? My apologies," Buddy smiles at me in her calm and amused way, "I thought you'd been holding your gun incorrectly, but perhaps I was just mistaken. I've been told they do things quite

differently on Mars."

"Look— can you stop picking on me? I don't know why you brought me here if you're just going to make fun of my shooting," I growl. My boots are scuffed and the laces undone, and I kick one of them against the ground and turn around and lean down to tie them up, "This is a stupid idea."

"I think you're mistaken," Buddy says. "My intention is not to *pick* on you, darling, only you seem so steadfast against accepting my help, or putting any effort into this little exercise whatsoever, that you're beginning to get on my nerves." She walks over to me as I stand up.

I can't help it. When she circles around me, the hair on the back of my neck stands on end. I keep my eye towards the floor, my other senses heightened to react to the smallest movement, the feeling of breath on my skin.

But none of that happens. Of course none of that happens.

It feels like eight minutes until she comes round the other side of me, but in reality it's only two steps, and then she's by my side and she reaches for the blaster in my holster. I flinch, and my hand closes around her wrist on instinct.

"I'm only borrowing it, darling," she comforts me, and I loosen my grip. She takes it, and places it on top of my gym bag, "Something's the matter." It's not even a question.

I grit my teeth, "The only thing that's the *matter* is the way you keep looking at me like I'm your goddamn case study."

Buddy sighs. "Darling, your attitude is starting to become difficult to deal with. I'm not *trying* to insult you," she says, her voice quiet and commanding. "You need to tell me what's on your mind."

"I don't, actually, is the funny thing about what you just said. I don't have to say I goddamn thing I don't feel like—"

"Juno," Buddy snaps.

And fuck me, I flinch. She hesitates for a moment, gives me a second to get over myself, and then speaks.

"You are one of my family members, but you are also one of my crew," Buddy continues, as though nothing happened, "I cannot have

one of my crew unable to look me in the eye." Then she adds, calmer, "And I cannot have one of my family feel like they are unable to tell me what's wrong."

I glance over at her for a second. It feels like trying to look into the sun, and I can't quite make it all the way there. So instead, I scrub my hand over my face and sigh.

"It's… nothing. Just… shooting again is… not great."

"I believe it's more than that," Buddy says matter-of-factly. "But I'll let you decide if and when you plan to tell me what's actually going on. As for the shooting part of it, that's precisely what we're here to unpack, darling. Let's talk about it, then."

"I don't really want to," I mutter. My arms are tight against my chest and I turn away from her. But that's awful, because then she's behind me — and for God's sake, she's never once showed any intent to hurt me, so I shouldn't be feeling this way about her.

She sighs. "Well, then, would you allow me to talk about it?"

I shrug a shoulder, "Do what you want."

"If my assessment of the current situation is correct, darling, you're terribly uncomfortable having to confront the idea of learning how to sharpshoot all over again. You also have a complicated relationship with shooting, because of the lady it reminds you of being. You're not sure if following the same path you did in your youth is going to turn yourself back into that lady or not, regardless of how irrational that thought seems when you try to explain it to yourself."

"Rrgh," I put the heel of my hand against the socket of my missing eye and push. I hate her knowing this, predicting this, getting in my head.

Buddy's voice seems to start and then stop in her throat, and then she says, "The part that worries me, darling, is that I have reason to believe I am somehow part of the problem. I'm not sure what I've done, but… I'm making you uncomfortable, aren't I?"

"No," I say quickly, and turn to face her again, "No, I'm sorry, look, it's not you, or— or anything you've done, 'cause you've been nothing but great to me since I got here. I just…"

"You just…" Buddy says flatly. I push against the mental block in my mind until I'm strong enough to meet her gaze. I see that she is

looking over me, calculating. “I remind you of someone,” she says.

This here is a blaster, Juno, Benzaiten, look closely. Keep it on you at all times. It ’s a big, scary, fucked-up world out there, little monsters. You have to be ready to use it on whichever nasty, slimy one of those creatures we call humans gets in your way.

You ’ll be lucky I don’t use it on one of you one day.

“I…” There are tears behind my eyes all of a sudden, and I laugh nervously, “It’s… look, nothing, I just…”

It’s just that every time somebody on this ship calls Buddy Aurinko their mother figure I want to scream in their faces. It’s just that when Peter confides to me that the trusts her almost as much as he trusts me, that he almost feels ready to think of her as a parent figure, my chest goes tight. I feel like telling him he’s wrong, it’s a bad idea, it’s going to end in so much pain for him, hasn’t he learnt his lesson by now, with Mag? Because there’s only one kind of one kind of parent, maybe — one kind of mother, definitely — and it’s the kind that sucks you in and spits you out and leaves you twenty years a wreck of yourself.

“I… my Ma gave me my first gun,” is what I manage, through gritted teeth.

“Your mother?” Buddy asks, and I see something close to realisation in her eye, which makes me feel sick and uncomfortable and like I’ve said too much. “What kind of person was your mother, Juno?”

That forces a laugh out of me, “Not much to know. I don’t know if you could even call her that. She was a—”

Monster is the word on my tongue, and the feeling of it in my mouth chokes me up. It’s so much of a habit to call her that, still, that it’s almost automatic. And isn’t that kind of fucked? That it’s instinct to think of her that way? I close my eye and breathe and almost start crying again.

I guess it turns out one hour’s long trip through your subconscious tearing the essence of your trauma apart and having a conversation with the brain ghost of your mother isn’t an instant fix for healing. Who would’ve thought, huh?

At once, I become aware of the tone in my voice and feel the tension in my shoulders and the feeling in my gut — it’s a feeling that belongs

to a different Juno Steel.

“She was,” I start again, calmer, “A genius, in a lot of ways. She knew people, really well, and she had an incredible imagination. But she… faced challenges, and at the end of the day, she wasn’t strong enough to get through them. My brother and I suffered for that.”

I wait in silence for her to say something, but she doesn’t for a long time. I try and concentrate on my breathing. I can’t look her in the eye — I’m too scared of what her face might show. Pity, or concern, or wariness, even, wary at what the kid of an abuser is capable of doing to the other members of his *family*.

“I’m sorry, Juno,” she says, finally. “Thank you for telling me.”

“I’m, uh… working on dealing with it,” I say, more of an apology than an explanation. “And you’re right, it’s… hard learning to shoot again. Feels too familiar in all the wrong ways.”

“We can stop, if you’d like,” Buddy offers. “You have a great deal of other skills that make you a valued member of this crew. Your sharpshooting doesn’t have to be one of them.”

I think about that. Try and poke at the jumble of thoughts and emotions in my brain to make sense of them enough to figure out how I feel. Sharpshooting might not be my only skill, but it was the one that had been the only thing getting me through the days for a lot of my life. Something I knew I could do that made me worth hanging around. A part of me I was proud of. One I’d rather not let go.

“Nah,” I say. “Just… give me a minute to get a hold of myself, and we’ll give it another crack.”

Buddy smiles, and she looks knowing and pleased and proud all in one, “Good. Take as long as you need.”

I go get myself a glass of water and try and shake myself out of whatever mood I’m in today. It’s not as though I usually jump when Buddy’s around me, hell, I know she’s nothing like Sarah Steel and I’m not a scared little lady anymore who would sit there and take it if she was. There’s just something, today… maybe it’s a date I’m forgetting. Maybe there’s no special reason for it, and it’s just flared up because I’m tired and a little emotionally wrung-out. Maybe it just is shooting, plain and simple as that — or the combination of shooting and Buddy together, with that way you feel like you can’t hide anything from her.

Frightened, aren 't you, little monster? Do you wish I was dead? Tell me you do: I can read it on your face.

I close my eye and breathe it out. I never wished she was dead, not seriously, not aside from the childish way every child wishes every bad guy was dead. But she *is* now, and she can't hurt me ever again. Not if I don't give her permission to.

So I go back to the gym.

"Feeling better?" Buddy asks. She's put her hair back, except for a few thick locks which hide the most part of her mechanical eye from view.

"Yeah. I… sorry, Buddy. I don't mean to complicate things. I'm alright, now."

"Never apologise, darling. I'd never dream of pushing you too far out of your comfort zone," she says, "If it ever gets bad again, I'd much rather you say something than try and push through it."

"Yeah," I say. Then shake my head, and then laugh, "You ever feel embarrassed to be the age you are?"

Buddy considers that, "How do you mean?"

"I mean… I don't know what I mean," I groan, "I mean… at forty I should be… I don't know. Stable, I guess. Settled down. Married, even, thinkin' about kids of my own. I guess I feel like my life's just started, you know? It makes me feel… kinda dumb, I guess."

Buddy smiles at me in a peculiar way. She walks over to the side of the room and sits down in the fold-out chair by the wall, gesturing to the second empty one beside her. I sit down.

"Juno, I don't think there's one of us on this ship that doesn't feel that way. Perhaps none more than your Peter — he's only just decided he wants to have a life at all. But Vespa and I are a considerable amount older than you, and we're just as new to all of this as you are."

"How much older *are* you, by the way?"

"Enough to consider *you* young, darling. Would you like to know what I like to think, when I find myself considering similar insecurities?"

The idea that Buddy Aurinko has doubts at all takes me by surprise, which is stupid. Of course she does — we all do — I've seen them in

the way she looks at Vespa sometimes. The way we all look at Vespa — like we have no idea what we can do to help. “Sure.”

“Good, because I was going to tell you anyway. I just think of how lucky we are that we get this chance,” Buddy leans back in her chair and looks at me, “Not many people get to live two whole lives, Juno, experience a whole world before they start living seriously. And yet, here we all are.”

Buddy Aurinko is a woman who possesses an air of wisdom that is impossible to ignore. She’s the kind of person that makes you want to shut up and listen, even if you’re a lady with a reputation for doing exactly the opposite of that.

My mother was like that, too. It was one of her redeeming qualities, one of the things that made it wrong to label her as a monster, as if she’d never done a good thing in her life. But that’s a tangent.

“Is there anything else you’d like to talk about, before we continue?”

There is, actually. And since it’s apparently time to let things all pour out, I shift in my seat and clear my throat, “Uh—maybe, yeah. This is unrelated.”

“Go ahead.”

“Did you ever used to… forget, at the start? That you’d lost an eye, I mean. Cause it’s not like my vision has changed, not really, not in a way I notice. And sometimes, I…” I struggle for the words for a moment. Buddy waits patiently for me to continue, “It feels like losing it all over again, when I remember. Or… it frightens me, when I look in the mirror and see that… god-awful eyelid, just sitting over an empty hole, where I’m expecting to see an eye. Do you know what will… stop that? Or when it’ll stop?”

It’s a strange and stupid thing that I ended up on a ship with someone who’s been through the same thing. It feels embarrassing to talk about, and useless, most of the time. Vespa and Jet don’t have much for me outside of medical advice, Rita just… doesn’t understand, can’t, not that it’s her fault, and it only makes her upset to try. And Peter…

I don’t talk about my eye with Peter. I’m scared he thinks I blame him for it. I know he’s quick to take things personally like that. I’m scared a part of me might. I don’t mean to, and it’s *not* his fault I swallowed that damn capsule, would’ve happened anyway, but…

I guess I just don't want him to know how it bothers me, is my point.

Buddy puts her hand on my knee and says, "When you find out the answer to that, darling, do me a favour and let me know."

Then she stands up. She walks down to the other side of the gym, where I can see the shooting target has started to peel off of the wall, and straightens it back up again. Then she walks back, picks up my gun from where she put it down, and holds it out to me.

"Maybe taking something back that your injury took from you will help."

So I take my blaster back. I let her correct my grip, even though it's embarrassing and pathetic, the way I have to be corrected like I've never held a gun in my life. I let her stand behind me, and I breathe deeply and remember that Sarah Steel is dead, and I let her correct my aim.

"You have to learn what kind of angle you need to off-shoot by to hit your target," she says quietly, "I can't help you with that, darling. You need to figure it out yourself."

I look down the barrel of my gun to the place it's pointing, directly onto the middle of the target. Then I shift it, just slightly.

The blast doesn't hit the bullseye. But it's a near thing.

I try again.

It feels good, to be honest. To feel powerful again. To feel strong and angry and ready to shoot. And Buddy's right, it's scary, too, feeling that anger and power and feeling the itch in my brain in the place where all my other old habits are ready to leap right out of me and back to the forefront. But I have control here, something I didn't let myself have in my life for a long, long time. So I keep shooting.

There's no magic epiphany that suddenly gives me all my skills back. Buddy told me learning to shoot again would be hard, but it's a challenge I have to start one day, if I ever want to get back on track.

"You're improving," Buddy says after a couple hours of it, once the room is so filled with smoke neither of us can stand standing around breathing it in.

"Yeah, sure," I say, and grab a cloth from my gym bag to wipe the

sweat off of my forehead. It doesn't quite stop me from smiling, though. Because I am. Slowly, I'm getting my grip back on my shooting again.

"What now?" Buddy asks, an amused tinge to her voice, "More shooting, or more life advice?"

"I think I'm good on both accounts for the time being. But, uh…" I fiddle with the cloth in my hands for a moment, "Thanks, Buddy." I offer her a little smile, "You're the best therapist I've ever had."

"I am *not* your therapist, darling," she says, but the smile on her face mirrors my own. "But as your captain, I'm happy to help. You're showing great promise with shooting already. We'll have you ship-shape at sharpshooting in no time. You're a natural."

"Yeah, I… always was pretty good at it," okay, a bit of a humble brag, but a lady's gotta let himself have a nice thing every now and again. "You know I held the marksmanship record in the HCPD for a decade?"

"I do. And I wouldn't be surprised if you don't have the potential to beat that record, if you keep working at it. There's a remarkable amount to be said for the effect of a little mental cleansing on productivity."

And damnit, that's a tempting idea. Not just getting my skills back but improving on them. A one-eyed, record-breaking sharpshooter.

"You… happen to be free tomorrow?"

"Darling, we're aboard a spacecraft travelling idly towards our next target, which is over two weeks away. I think it's safe to say *all* of us are free, tomorrow." She smiles, "Will I see you here?"

"That would be good. Thanks, Buddy. You're… a good captain."

Her smile says she knows she is. "Thank you. You're a good shipmate. And Juno?"

I had started picking up my stuff, but I pause to look back at her, "Yeah?"

"I hope you realise that the idea of *family* as I present it on this ship is metaphorical. There is no requirement for you to think of me as your mother, or any sort of labelled parent, aunt, or grandparent figure, in

that case. Not if that's not what you want. I am not trying to fill that role."

I swallow. My throat has gone dry, "Thanks, Buddy."

"And you'd better be glad I take it metaphorically, darling, or otherwise Vespa and I would have had to have had a long chat with you and Pete by now."

She laughs at the face I make, and I make a show out of pretending to gag as I walk out of the room.

Chapter End Notes

comments feed me.....

Vespa & Jet: Routine

Chapter Summary

In which Vespa is not alone.

Chapter Notes

IM SO SORRY THIS IS SO LATE i'll be honest i got SO stuck on this chapter that it remained unwritten..... until like just now lol..... and its a little short, but i still think its good!!!!!

I'll post tonight's chapter at its regular time

TWs: hallucinations, discussions of psychosis

It is early morning on the Carte Blanche. I have awoken before any of the others in order to conduct routine assessments of the Carte Blanche's steering and handling mechanisms. There is something troubling me about them.

In terms of performance, the Carte Blanche is behaving up to standard. There is something bugging me about its performance nevertheless. So I sit in the co-captain's chair, and run the routine diagnostics.

The ship is quiet at this hour. The distant creaks of its parts, the rumble of its engines deep below, are greatly comforting to me. They remind me that this ship, like my body, is comprised of hundreds of thousands of parts, and each — each bolt, wire, chip, and wall panel — is as key to its survival as the last. A fault in any one of these parts could kill us all in an instant.

Perhaps this should be cause for alarm. I have noticed when I explain my fascination with this concept to Juno, he starts to look as though he is becoming space-sick. I don't find it to be alarming, myself. I find there is a great peace in the harmony of machinery — biological, or otherwise. The knowledge that within each machine are smaller machines — mechanisms, relationships between minuscule parts — that each tightly control individual parts of the larger body. Each of the individual parts are interesting of their own, and each can be methodologically categorised, placed, and explained within the context of the whole. There are no processes that cannot be placed; no flaws that cannot be explained.

I hear footsteps on the metal floor of the hallway outside a few moments before the door opens. I twist in my seat to see Vespa with her back to the wall. She eyes me over.

“Codeword?”

Since the crew were made… violently aware… of the existence of shapeshifting technology, many of Vespa’s paranoia and paranoid hallucinations have centred upon the idea of an impostor. As such, Buddy implemented a system by which any member of the Carte Blanche may identify themselves as authentic.

“Banana.”

Vespa nods, sharply, and walks over. Her hands are in the pockets of her cargo pants, and she falls into the chair beside mine, slumping immediately. “How’s it going?”

I gesture to the display on the dashboard in front of us, on which pictures of schematics open and close as the computer carries out routine checks on the systems of the ship. “I am performing scans on the ship.”

She nods again, and looks across the dashboard. Then she spins in her chair, slowly, and surveys the rest of the room.

I find Vespa companionable. She appreciates the value of silence, a trait few of the other members of this crew share with me. It is not that I mind loud people, most of the time, only that I rarely am in the company of those who are content with quiet.

“You are up early,” I comment.

She grunts as reply, her chair eventually spinning around so that we are facing the same direction again.

It is not a secret that Vespa often walks the halls of the ship on patrol. I have heard her pass by my cabin many times — I have even joined her, once or twice. I am long accustomed to the strange comfort found in repetitive action.

Vespa shifts in her chair, and then kicks her legs up on the dash. The shape of a handle of a knife in an ankle holster juts out in fabric of her pants. There is something crusted on the bottom of her boots. She catches me looking at her and rolls her eyes, taking her feet off the dash again.

“What’s the matter with you? Can’t handle a little dirt on your machinery?”

“No.”

She huffs out a little laugh. “Fair enough.”

Silence fills the air between us for a while. Vespa’s smile slowly drains from her face, replaced by something more haunted. After a moment, she shakes her head. Then she stands. “Going for a walk. You comin’?”

My diagnostics won’t be finished for a while. I stand up as well, and we begin to walk down the halls of the Carte Blanche.

Vespa’s route is never the same twice. I believe this is a part — conscious or otherwise — of her assassin background. It is natural to her not to leave any trail, or fall into any habit that may be traceable. The only consistent part of the route is that every room is checked thoroughly, more than once. While she checks the room for any sign of displacement, I check the vents, the seals for signs of damage, any relevant machinery for noticeable changes in readings.

In the garage, Vespa stops me with a hand on my arm. “Was that box there before?” she growls, under her breath.

I follow her gaze. “Yes. I moved it there earlier.”

She does not let go of me, “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I moved it there earlier.”

“*Certain?”*

*“*Yes. I moved it there earlier.”

“Alright.” Vespa releases my arm. She breathes out heavily, and then nods, “Alright. Thanks.”

She walks over to the boxes to check the rest of them. I go to check on the Ruby 7 and our other car. Ruby lights up when I walk towards it, its lights dim enough not to blind me while letting me know it is aware of my presence.

I stop and look at it.

If there is peace in an understanding in the endless complexity of a machine; of each of its fragile inner workings and how they

collaborate to form a greater purpose, there is a deep unease in being unable to look at the inner parts of a machine and draw conclusions to arrive at its bigger picture.

The Ruby 7… has begun to unnerve me, of late. It is a reminder that there are some things for which mechanical explanations can never be found. I find it difficult to be at peace in a world in which some things can simply not be explained.

Vespa screams.

I turn from the Ruby and run back to the middle of the room. Vespa is hunched near some boxes, her fingers digging into her scalp.

“Vespa,” I run to her and kneel in front of her. “Are you alright?”

Vespa mumbles something under her breath, and will not meet my eye.

Vespa is not the first friend I have had with psychosis. Many of the people I have met in my journey to recovery have suffered psychosis as a side-effect of their drug use. Some of them were my very best friends. However, each experience is unique, and I am still learning how to respond appropriately to Vespa’s attacks.

“You are in the Carte Blanche,” I inform her, “There is nothing here, Vespa. You are safe.”

Through her fingers, she looks up at me with a wild, frightened eye. “Code… word?”

I check the time on my comms. “It is four in the morning. The codeword is salmon.”

Rita chose many of the codewords.

Vespa swallows and nods her head. She flinches, and then shakes her head two times. She makes no move to stand.

I sit down beside her, “Are you alright?”

“Bad brain day,” she responds.

Vespa has a variety of phrases she can use to articulate her feelings, a system of verbal signalling established between her and Buddy used when Vespa is unable to properly articulate her feelings. This one means she is likely to struggle with invasive thoughts and

hallucinations today. On days like this, she can often spend hours completing her usual route — checking each room and becoming wary over every slight change.

Vespa crosses her legs and crosses her arms. She glares into the distance.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I ask her.

She snorts. “Yeah, that’s what you all wonder. Is there anything you could do to fix poor, broken Vespa.”

“That is not what I meant—”

“Yes,” she looks at me suddenly, her jaw clenched, “It *is*. You think I don’t get it? I know what you all think. I know you think I’m crazy for having to check every room a hundred times a day, for being *frightened* of every tiny movement. You don’t think it’s not on my mind, constantly? You don’t think I’d stop if I could?”

“It exhausts you,” I realise out loud.

She laughs, a little breathlessly, “That’s sure a way to put it, Jet. You have no idea what it’s like, this feeling tugging away at the back of your mind that if you don’t check and someone dies — if we all die — it’ll be *your* fault. Trying to have a goddamn meal, a goddamn *second to think* without a little voice in the back of your mind telling you there’s something wrong, and if you don’t find it, everything that happens next will be all because of you.”

She hugs her knees to her chest and buries her face in them. I place my hands in my lap, “I was not aware. That sounds very difficult.”

Vespa shrugs one shoulder and turns her head from me.

“You are not solely responsible for the safety of this crew,” I remind her. “If there is a fault, it would be the job of any one of us to report it to the captain.”

“That would be comforting if I wasn’t the *only person* who seems to take it seriously,” she says.

We sit in silence for a while. I turn over this new information in my head. I had previously thought Vespa’s routine was a source of comfort, as it is for me — not a source of great distress. I now realise that we differ on this front. If only there was a simpler way to reassure

her of the safety of the crew.

And then I think of one.

“Perhaps,” I say, “Rita and I could link your comms to the security feed of the Carte Blanche. We could install extra cameras in some rooms, and even motion sensors. You could complete your routine without having to walk the halls yourself.”

Vespa is quiet for a long time. Finally, she shifts, her head lifting from her knees and her legs crossing on the floor. “That’s nice, but what stops me from becoming convinced that the camera feed is faked? Tampered with?”

“Nothing. But it may work for some time. Perhaps if you begin to get worried, you can ask me to run diagnostics on the systems. You trust me, and I find repairing systems calming. We could work together to ensure the continued safety of our crew.”

Vespa puts her elbows on her knees. “You’d do that?”

That surprises me, “Of course. You are my friend, and your concerns should be taken seriously. I would be happy to do what I can to help.”

Vespa appears to struggle with words. After a moment, she reaches out. Her hand takes mine.

We sit in silence in the garage of the Carte Blanche for some time, and then leave to have breakfast and start on our new project.

“To the left,” Vespa mutters.

I strain to shift the placement of the camera on the wall. Vespa, standing beside the stepladder I am on, watches the camera feed through her comms to ensure its placement gives her a satisfying view of the room.

“Yeah, there.”

I bring my other hand up to begin to drill the camera to the wall.

“This is so great,” says Rita, shouting over the noise of the drill. She is sitting on a nearby crate, eating snacks, “Ain’t it? It’s like we’re workin’ on a project together! I ain’t set up a surveillance system as a group project since I was in highschool — actually that project was really fun cause we ended up finding out our principal was involved

on this *huge* pyramid scheme by hackin' into his mailbox and then the *police* got involved and it was really cool. Wait. Oh no! I hope the police don't get involved in this group project cause that's probably gonna be real bad for all of us. Wait. Are there police but for thieves?"

"No," I say.

"Aw. Well, that's silly! How else are you gonna make sure thieves are stickin' to the thief rules!"

I step down from the ladder and peer up at the camera. "Is it working?"

Vespa slides her finger across the screen. On the wall, the camera moves.

"Check the motion sensor, too!" Rita jumps off the crate. She runs over to the wall and starts waving at a small black box. A notification chimes on Vespa's comms.

The door opens, and Juno walks in. "Oh, hey, here's where you all are. What's going on?"

"Stay out of it, Steel," Vespa growls.

"We're doing a technology project!" Rita yells.

Juno raises both his hands, turns on his heel, and leaves again.

Rita runs back over to Vespa, and peers over her comms, "Alright. There should be enough storage on there so that you can look back through the past twenty-four hours of camera feed, if you just click—" Vespa clicks "—yeah! Sweet! Alright, I'm going on to the next room!"

Rita darts out of the room the second the door opens enough to let her through.

"She's in a good mood," Vespa comments, once the room has stopped ringing with the echo of Rita's yelling.

"Rita is often in a good mood. Working on projects makes her happy. As does helping people."

I go to follow Rita out of the room, but Vespa stops me with a hand on my arm.

"Jet," she says, and doesn't meet my eyes.

“Vespa.”

She is silent for a moment. “Thank you,” she says. “I didn’t… expect anybody would be able to understand. Let alone help me out, instead of just tell me to get over it.”

“In my experience, being told to get over it rarely helps.”

She lets go of my arm, “Yeah. Still.”

“You are welcome, Vespa. Will we go to the next room?”

“Yeah,” she says. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

Peter & Jet: Never Meet Your Heroes

Chapter Summary

In which Peter meets his hero.

Chapter Notes

75% of the way through!!!!!!!! Thank you all SO MUCH for all your comments and support, your comments have all really meant a lot to me!!!!

This is one of my favourite chapters. I actually love Jet & Peter's dynamic.

This chapter be like: diagnoses peter with fake, diagnoses peter with trans, diagnoses peter with adhd, diagnoses peter with trauma, diagnoses peter with daddy issues

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When so much of your survival has depended on your ability to make goals and stick to them, as mine has, you become very good at identifying and getting exactly what it is you want. There's little room for a lapse in precision during a heist, even less so in your choice of shelter when you're on the run, or your choice of words when walking on the hairline trigger of befriending someone who will later become a cornerstone in your grand plan.

This is to say that I have somehow been gifted the opportunity to work with Jet Sequiliak, a hero in the world of crime, and I *will* learn how to become friends with other people efficiently enough that he will have no choice but to like me.

It's a bright and early morning upon the Carte Blanche, or at least we all pretend it is, monotonous as time becomes during long-term space travel. I'm rather used to it by now, myself, but poor dear Juno has been struggling to adjust. Modern ships do their hardest to simulate a day/night system, programmable to be adjusted to suit whatever planet you originate from. The Carte Blanche is not a modern ship.

According to the ship's clock, it is 4am. Rita, Juno and Buddy are of the opinion that this is the kind of time only acceptable to be awake at if one has not slept the night before — they therefore still consider it *night*. Jet and Vespa, on the other hand, find 4am a prime time of the

morning to wake up and complete some leftover tasks before the oncoming day gives them a heaping of new ones. As for myself, I haven't bothered to draw distinctions between night and day since I was a child. There are times when I am awake, and times when I am asleep, and the matters of morning and evening within them are arbitrary.

There is a certain peace to the ship at times like these. The hum of it is louder in the absence of speech and clatter, its gentle purring from floors and floors below my feet. The creaks and ticks of the metal and machinery of the ship straining against the crushing void of space are as comforting as they are unnerving, which overall contributes to a sensation of moderate contentment.

The kitchen is empty. I make myself a cup of tea, and keep one eye on the clock. When it nears 4.15, I clean up my mug and make my way to the training gym. In the corner cupboard is a yoga mat. I shake the dust out of it and put it down on the floor, and then take off my nightgown and fold it away.

It was hard finding it, I'm not going to lie. But luckily I haven't grown since the last time my alias required a yoga outfit. I glance at myself in the mirrored sides of the gym. Tight, hot pink, spandex leggings. A bright yellow leotard, and green legwarmers. If I don't say so myself, it still flatters my figure after all this time.

There is nothing left for me to do but wait. So I start to stretch.

At 4.30 on the dot, the door slides open.

"Ah! Goodmorning, Jet. How are you this wonderful day upon the Carte Blanche?"

Jet stares at me, "Ransom. Why are you here?"

"Well, I'd noticed you like to do a bit of yoga in your mornings! I rather like yoga myself, you know, though I never have the time. I've been thinking of getting back into the habit. So I think I'll join you from now on," I smile and sink down into the splits, "It'll give us a chance to get to know one another."

"My yoga routine is a vital part of my daily meditation," Jet says, lowering his duffel bag to the floor, "It is essential that I am uninterrupted."

"We needn't talk!" I assure him, "I appreciate a little quiet

mindfulness myself, you know."

The look he gives me somehow manages to stay perfectly impassive and also convey a deep disappointment. This does not discourage me at all — I knew the size of the task I would be working to complete the moment I decided to complete it.

But he voices no more complaint, and he leans down to unzip his duffel bag and pull out his yoga mat. I change my splits to be horizontal rather than vertical, and then lie flat on the floor. My hamstrings burn.

I wasn't lying — completely. Not about the part of thinking of getting into the habit. I've always been peculiarly limber, but as I grow older I find my old acrobatics becoming increasingly difficult. It's become painfully clear to me that I have to change my habits, or else risk losing my flexibility altogether.

"You are in the way."

I raise my head and shoulders from the ground to see that Jet can't put his mat down next to mine with my legs out the way they are, "Ah. My apologies," I take myself out of the splits and sit with my chin on my knees instead. "When did you start up yoga?"

Jet lays down his mat and straightens it meticulously before he answers me. That's the mark of a great thief — attention to detail. Care about the things that matter. Jet gets it. If only he could see how similar we are, he might understand why our future partnership could be legendary.

Jet sits down on the mat, "Seven years ago."

"I see! Trying to maintain your dexterity, eh? I find myself in a similar position now."

"I estimate that you are multiple decades younger than me," Jet says, "And I have never been very dexterous. I doubt any similarity between us in this regard."

So he admits there are similarities in other regards, then! I hide a pleased smile by twisting my waist away from him in another stretch.

Jet folds his legs and rests his hands on his knees. He breathes in deeply, and then out slowly. His whole chest heaves. He's in a nice, clean tank top and leggings.

He is rather attractive, in his own way. By the way I've come to learn Juno's body language, he would agree with me. But I have no real interest in him — Juno is much more my type — and this line of thinking is not very calming. I close my eyes and match his position, breathing slowly.

In, out. In, out.

All said and done, it is rather boring. I try to focus. I concentrate on the blacks of my eyes, and the feeling of my intercostal muscles stretching and relaxing, my ribcage lifting and falling. Anatomy — I know that, and I can use its basics to concentrate. Feel my body move. Try to label the parts of the ventilation system. In, out. (Trachea, bronchus) In, out (Bronchioles, alveolus).

"How long do you do this for?" the words slip out of my mouth before I think them, propelled by exasperation and restlessness.

I hear Jet grunt and shift, but when I open one eye to peek at him he remains stock-still. "If you do not agree with my methods, you are not obliged to follow them. I require silence."

"Right. Sorry," I close my eye and breathe again. In, out… In… out… God, people live like this? I've used meditation before, occasionally — when one gets into character it is occasionally required that one quite literally spends time separating his mental state from the character's. But it's different, somehow, doing it for a purpose and doing it for no reason.

It has to be ten *years* before Jet finally lets out his final meditative breath. I hear him move and crack my eyes open to confirm that he is now raising his arms towards the ceiling. Thank God. I copy his movements.

"This is rather pleasant, don't you think?" I ask, "Just the two of us men, exercising our minds."

"You do that often. It makes me uncomfortable," Jet's voice rumbles from the centre of him. I can almost feel it, just above the rumble of the ship's engines.

"Do… what?"

"Refer to us as men, whenever you talk about Juno, yourself, and myself when any combination of us are together."

A violent wave of mortification and anger and guilt rises in me so suddenly that I almost drown in it. I wait until it passes, swallow down the nausea, and say, “I… wasn’t aware it made you uncomfortable. Do you prefer other terms, or—?”

“I am a man,” Jet states, matter-of-factly. “I just do not see why it is worth mentioning, or specifying, that we happen to use the same words to describe ourselves. I also feel that Juno is less so inclined to be comfortable with such terminology.”

The wave rises again. The first time around, it was the horrifying idea of blatantly disrespecting a person I admire so much, or the equally humiliating sensation of being *called out* by a person whose opinion of me matters greatly to me, that caused it. This second wave is born from the incredibly offensive idea that — “You don’t think I checked which terms my partner prefers before I used them?” I only barely keep the acid out of my tone. “Jet, you insult me.”

“That was not my intention,” Jet says, calmly, and I feel the wave begin to ebb.

“I simply—” I say, and then grit my teeth. The wave washes up behind them and back again. I swallow back my words and readjust my position. Outside of Juno, vulnerability is still a danger. I cannot let this sense of camaraderie, this temporary family metaphor, threaten that. I may want to become closer to Jet, and the others, but I will not become weak in the meantime.

“I was not aware that I did that. I will take what you said into consideration,” I concede at last.

Jet’s response is a mildly agitated grunt. I have a feeling I’ve done more to hurt than help my goal.

Jet stretches his legs out in front of him and reaches as far as he can. His fingers brush the bottom of his kneecaps. I do the same, my body extending easily so that I close my fingers over my toes.

The truth is, the longer this goes on, the more infuriatingly stupid it gets. I have spent *days* analysing Jet’s patterns — the decaffeinated tea he drinks, when he leaves to take the Ruby out for drives, the yoga he likes to do, the food he likes and where he likes to eat it, for God’s sake, even how long he spends in the bathroom on average. I am nothing if not immensely detailed, and I have workshopped every facet of my personality when I am around him to be the exact mixture of personality traits and habits to compliment his own.

So why does he seem to *hate* me more with each passing day? All Rita had to do was mention the streams he was in, and they were best friends immediately. But the last time I tried to compliment those awful movies on their generous portrayal of his character, of The Unnatural Disaster, who was such a legend in the history-books of crime, he had almost *hit* me.

I must be doing something wrong. I watch him carefully while we bend ourselves into different positions. Jet stands up and tries to reach for his toes again — I bend over backwards and grab my ankles, feeling the stretch down my stomach and into my hips. I bend my head back to glance at Jet through my legs. He is still and focused, quiet. Meditative.

Perhaps I am too busy for him, too restless and fleeting in my attention. But then what of Rita, who is never still?

I let go of my legs and pull myself back to my feet. Pain shoots up my spine suddenly, a protest at the lack of proper limbering up — and to think ten years ago I used to twist my body in ways twice as experimental with no preparation at all! — and I hiss, clutching at it.

Jet peers over me disinterestedly for a moment, like the only thought that occurs to him is that I have disrupted the peace and quiet again, and then looks away again. And that's just— well. That's just it.

"*Why* do you do that?" I demand. My fist, clenched by my side, trembles. I hide it behind my back.

Jet straightens his back to look at me, "Why do I do what?"

"*Look* at me like that. Like I remind you of something gone *spoiled*. You know I—" I shake again, and laugh at myself, "I can't crack you, Jet! I *try* to be nice. I try to be exactly the kind of person you'd like, so… why can you not even *look* at me like you give half a thought about whether I live or die?"

Jet stares at me impassively. I want to hit him. I want to let the sting behind my eyes take over and cry like a wounded child. Instead I grit my teeth and narrow my eyes at him, "Just tell me what it is. Tell me what you hate about me so much and I'll *change* it."

Jet stares at me for longer. It is a test, and I take it, biting hard into my tongue to stop myself from speaking any more. After a moment, he sighs in a tired, resigned way, and sits down on the mat in lotus position. He gestures for me to do the same.

I copy him.

"You have identified the problem yourself," Jet says. He breathes in slowly and then out again, infuriatingly slow, as though I am not hanging on to his every word. "It is not that you must change something about yourself in order to become more likable. It is that you do."

"That makes no sense," comes out through my teeth, a little harsher than it was meant to be. Then I curse myself in my head, because there's only one other person I used to talk to like this, back when I was a teenager. I push the thought away, but it begins to snowball, more evidence collecting in my head that makes my heart pound in my chest. He does *not* remind me of Mag, he does *not*, he does *not*…

"I do not trust how easily your personality can change," Jet continues. "I do not appreciate that you have changed it in an attempt to manipulate a relationship between us. It is deceit, and I find it hard to envision myself as friends with a person who deceives others about who they are."

"That—" I frown, and then shake my head, "No, it's not deceit. It's being friends, that's what being friends *is*, finding similarities between you and another person. How else are you meant to—?"

Like me are the words I cut myself off from saying. *How else are you meant to like me?* Because I want him to. I want him to like me, and perhaps even mentor me, in a way I have missed ever since—

I shake my head again and file the thoughts away.

"Finding similarities, yes," Jet says, "But not faking them. And learning also to appreciate differences. You cannot make friends without being honest."

A bitter laugh escapes me, "And if being honest would only make you more dislikable than ever? What then, Jet?"

"I find this is often not the case," Jet says, his voice reflecting a certain level of curiosity, "Take Juno, for example."

"Juno," I parrot, wondering how exactly Jet is about to correlate the idea of *Juno* and *dislikable* in the same sentence, and wondering if he realises how close I am to three hidden knives and his throat right now.

“Much of Juno’s personality, objectively, is dislikable,” Jet says matter-of-factly, and I decide to give him five seconds to keep talking before I lunge for him.

“Less so since the growth he endured as a result of our meeting in the desert many months ago,” Jet continues, “But the fact remains that he is short-tempered, quick to assume, and occasionally worrying in his hygiene habits.”

Okay. That’s it. I—

“However,” Jet says smoothly, as though he senses my discomfort, “These traits are displayed with a large degree of honesty. As such, I find it hard to dislike him. I think this pattern explains why many of the friends he has have stuck by him, such as Rita.”

Juno. My petulant detective. I think on Jet’s words for a moment while he continues to stretch. It is true that he is quick to air his grievances, painfully honest in all situations, under all manner of personas. He is always Juno, no matter what else changes.

It was that that attracted me to him so strongly, I remember. His moral outrage. The way his values shone from within him, undeniable, and obvious, leaving him so vulnerable to manipulation — and yet he remained willing to endure that manipulation, as long as it meant sticking to what he believed in.

“I see,” I mutter.

Jet continues to stretch. I bring my knees up to my chest and rest my chin on them. What happens, then, if one’s safety relies on dishonesty? I am reminded again of my conversation with Juno after the heist of the Gilded Globe — of the crossroads I sat at. Of the moral question, yes, but also on the decision I was forced to make — a question I still haven’t answered. Is one’s safety worth the price of living a life in which you are never known, even to yourself?

In many ways, my childhood shaped me. The little voice that belongs to a seventeen-year-old version of myself warns me that I am not safe. Reminds me of what I fought for — that even those you perceive to be *family* can betray you. It warns me not to fall into the same trap again, of caving in to the desire to be known, *wanted*, in any form of the word, and letting my guard down in the process.

Is that voice rational? Is the world that child lives in different to the one I find myself in now? I do not know. I feel like to ignore his

advice would be to let him down. Seventeen-year-old Peter Nureyev has been let down enough.

But perhaps it is not letting him down. Perhaps it is more of… laying him to rest. There has been a terrified child living within me for far too long. Perhaps it is time to work on setting him free.

I clear my throat and stand up, “You’ll have to excuse me, Jet. I’ve just remembered I don’t like yoga at all.”

I fold up my mat and tuck it away. Then I leave Jet to the rest of his routine.

Later that night, I find him.

He’s in his room, reading a book. I knock carefully on the side of the open door.

Jet looks up at me, “Ransom.”

“Sequiliak. Do you have a moment?”

“What is it you want?”

I step into his room and close the door behind me. I sit down on the end of his bed, with my hands in my lap, “Well, firstly, I thought I’d offer a little more explanation for a mishap earlier this morning.”

Jet stares at me with calculating eyes, but says nothing. I take that as permission to continue.

“When you said it makes you uncomfortable when I specify that you, Juno and myself all refer to ourselves as men, I… understand why. I also was not lying when I said I don’t realise that I do it.” My hands clench in my lap and I sigh, “I suppose I simply… got into the habit as a child to refer to myself as a man as often as the opportunity arose. I was… frequently mistaken as otherwise, before my mentor began ensuring other people got it right. It used to mean a lot to me to be considered *one of the men* — though I can’t say it matters much to me anymore.”

Jet keeps staring me down. “Thank you for your honesty,” he says. That’s all he says.

My throat is dry. I try to swallow anyway, “If you’re willing to listen, I’d like to tell you about myself in more detail.”

After a moment, Jet places his reading tablet down on his desk and stands. He turns his chair around so that it faces me, and sits down again. He says nothing.

So I tell him about Brahma. That, at least, is not too much of a secret. I was born on Brahma, and there was an authoritarian regime in effect at the time. I admit that my mentor, Mag, was a large man who Jet in some ways reminded me of. I skip over the details of his death, and instead describe a young boy who scattered himself among the stars, hoping to find a way to commit himself so completely to his work that he would never feel the ache of grief, of loneliness, ever again.

“You were the epitome of that, to me,” I tell him. “Someone who had learnt to train himself into a weapon, who had outrun his moral core, and used that weapon to re-write history. Who didn't suffer from things like... grief, or anxiety. I… killed people, just to prove to myself I could be like you.”

Jet closes his eyes at that, in a slow, pained way, and I can tell it sickens him to hear. It sickens me as well, down to my core. I am an idiot for telling him this. If it ends with him never able to look me in the eyes again, I will have deserved it.

“I’m sorry,” I say at the end. “I’m sorry for attempting to emulate you. I’m sorry for glorifying parts of you that were unhealthy to both of us. I was hurt, and my view of my world was influenced by the trauma I experienced. I… am working on letting go of those traits, of resorting to them out of fear. I am trying to put that version of myself away.”

Something changes in Jet then. He turns on the bed towards me and takes my hands in his. I almost jump off the bed with the suddenness of his movements, an age-old instinct priming me to run.

His hands are warm and very dry. "You made me... Uncomfortable. I saw myself in you. I did not like that you glorified parts of me that I have tried for many decades to outrun. But this was irrational. You are not like me. But I will not let you make the same mistakes. So take my advice: do not try to force him away,” he says. “Embrace what he has given you, and accept that you are influenced by him. Let him find his place and his role inside the larger picture of you.”

There’s a shaking forcefulness to his voice. I’m not fully sure what he means by what he says, but it strikes me as something that has come from the core of him — something brutally honest, that he has had to learn. So I nod, “I will try.”

Jet grunts, satisfied, and lets go of my hands, “It is a mistake I had to learn the hard way. You must learn to forgive yourself.”

I see Mag’s face in my mind’s eye, clear and vivid as it always is when it comes to me, and I almost pitch over. Jet’s hand comes to rest on my back and he keeps me steady until the nausea passes.

“Be yourself. Everybody else is already taken,” Jet says, in the dead-serious voice he puts on when he’s quoting a proverb of his. “You would be wise to remember this, Ransom.”

I realise that in his own way, he is offering me a way forward. A path through which we can connect. I almost laugh.

“It’s Nureyev,” I say, and grasp his massive hand in mine. “Peter Nureyev. And… thank you, Jet. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Chapter End Notes

.....so abt those comments tho

Rita & Jet: Stream Team

Chapter Summary

In which Rita gets comforted, for once.

Chapter Notes

THAT LATEST EP THO!! SO GLAD MY NEXT 3 CHAPTERS HAVE RITA IN EM I LOVE HER SO MUCH

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I gotta shout since I ain't got spare hands to knock. Under one arm I've got three packets of chips (luckily I ain't gottta bring any for Jet because he doesn't eat them), and in the other hand I have the ends of a big blanket so it drags like a big net, full'a the cushions from my room. My room's a little nicer, but this way by bringin' all my comfy stuff with me, it gets to feel like a sleepover a little bit. And I love sleepovers. Me and Frannie used to do them all the time— though, Frannie and my sleepovers tended to be quite a bit different, if ya know what I'm sayin'.

"Mistah Jet," I call out, shiftin' foot to foot. "Mistah Jet, I know you're in there!"

"Rita."

"Argh!" the chips fall outta my hands when I spin around to face Jet, just behind me. I frown and kick out at him, "Hey! It ain't decent to scare a girl like that!"

"My apologies. I was in the bathroom."

Jet ain't the kinda guy to do mean things and mean 'em, so I forgive him. Especially when he picks up the chip packets from the ground and opens the door for me to follow him into his room.

"Allllright. Now, do you remember where we were last time, or am I gonna have to repeat the whole synposis to ya *again*?" I plonk myself down on the end of the bed and start straightenin' out the blanket. I got all my favourite cushions, even that little dog one Mistah Steel gave one of his old eyepatches to, and I've been takin' real good care of that on accounta it's special to me, now.

“I believe I recall,” Jet says. “The last episode we watched had Princess Bizhan Abtin and her fated nemesis Countess Darab team up to defeat the space raptors from taking over the alien capital of Shahnameh, yes?”

“Yeah!” I clap my hands together. Mistah Steel could never remember the plot of *Dinosaurs in Space: A Story of the Extraterrestrial Monarchy After the Invention of Time-travel.* Usually, he’d just grumble and complain and guess the endin’ without havin’ remembered a single one of the names of the characters in the first place. It’s nice havin’ a movie partner who’s actually interested, for once.

“I do not understand why the two of them teamed up,” Jet says. He undoes his pony tail and puts the hairband onto his wrist. “Princess Bizhan Abtin could have easily taken down the space raptors herself.”

“Yeah, well—but it’s about the *romance,* Mistah Jet,” I enthuse, “*Yes,* so Princess Bizhan Abtin coulda just pressed the big button sayin’ ‘kill all dinosaurs’, but it’s so much more *exciting* to see her decide not to just so that she’s forced to team up with the Countess!”

Jet purses his lips for a moment. “What rating did this stream get from Fermenting Sim-Tomatoes?”

“Oh, that ain’t the point! It’s modern art, Mistah Jet. You ain’t ready to accept it, is all.”

Jet frowns seriously, “My apologies. Clearly, I have much to learn.”

“I forgive ya. Come on, siddown already.”

I crawl onto the bed, and set up the cushions so it looks all like there’s a little family all around us. I keep the dog one for myself, though.

Jet sits down beside me, and we start the stream. I ain’t tellin’ Mistah Jet, but I’ve already seen this one a million times, which means I just let myself eat the chips and enjoy all the romance bits.

Those are my favourite parts of watchin’ movies with Mistah Steel. He likes to say he ain’t a big fan of it, but he’s a massive sap when it comes to romance. Sometimes I put a romance movie on just cause I know it’ll make Mistah Steel be so quiet he won’t even complain when I cuddle up to him.

It’s kinda different with Jet. Which ain’t like it’s a problem, everyone’s different after all. But… well, it doesn’t matter.

I squeeze the dog cushion in my hands.

Soon enough, I get bored, so I ask Mistah Jet to lie down on his tummy on the bed. He grabs a cushion to rest his head on so he can still see the screen, and I sit on his back.

Now this is something Juno would *never* let me do — well, I couldn't anyway, what with the way he used to wear his hair, all cropped short to his head. But he wouldn't've ever let me do this without non-stop complaint.

I run my fingers through Jet's long white hair, and then start to braid it while he watches the rest of the episode. I mouth some of the words to my favourite parts of it as he watches.

Jet has nice hair to braid. It's real fun. I like doing fun things to my hair when I can, but it's less fun when you do it on yourself. Mistah Steel's surprisingly good at braidin' hair like mine, but he's all kindsa busy these days.

Like he heard me thinkin' about him, a second later comes a peal of laughter through the thin walls that don't belong to the owner of the room.

Jet growls and reaches for the remote.

"They're just laughin'," I reassure him.

"For now," Jet agrees, reluctantly.

I purse my lips and keep braiding. Mistah Ransom says somethin' to him just loud enough to hear if your ears are pricked, and Mistah Steel laughs again. It's good to hear him laugh. He never used to laugh around me. Not the way he does with Mistah Ransom, anyway.

"That hurt," Jet informs me.

"Oh!" I slacken my grip on his braid, "Would you look at that, I really was tuggin', huh? Sorry, Mistah Jet."

Anyway, Mistah Jet's a real good friend, and I shouldn't be thinkin' about Mistah Steel when I'm with him. Plus! Everything's never been better with him, and that makes me real happy.

I finish the braid just as the movie finishes, and I was right about Mistah Steel and Mistah Ransom — they laugh a couple more times,

but there ain't no other sounds. I gotta feelin' they started using Juno's room for *that*, since Mistah Ransom always seems a suspicious kinda happy after they spend the night together in there.

It's kinda cute, actually! Like a double date. Except Mistah Jet and I ain't like that. And we can't see each other. And Mistah Steel probably ain't even thinking about me.

"Rita?" Jet asks, "Are you going to get off of my back, now?"

"Oh! Sorry, Mistah Jet," I roll off of him back onto the bed. I land on my back with a *floof*.

I stare up at the ceiling. A moment later, Jet's face comes into view hoverin' over me.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I stick out my tongue at him, "Of course! I'm *Rita*."

Jet blinks at me, "That does not answer my question."

"Yes, it does. I'm Rita, silly. And that means I ain't never get upset. Well, not except if Mistah Steel annoys me, but really, that's all just for play, yanno? Cause he's grumpy and I'm grumpy back and it's kinda our whole thing."

"I have not observed this so far," Jet says.

"Well, yeah, well. Things are different. But that's okay!" I sit up. "C'mon. Have I ever showed you *No Dogs On The Moon: A Tale of One Man's Journey to get Man's Best Friend in Space*? That one's Mistah Steel's favourite, we always watch it together with this— we have this snack he says he hates but he'll only let me cook it if we're watching this particular scene, I'll tell ya about it, it's *like* caramel popcorn but only if ya deepfried it and then added chocolate ice-cream and then you took all *that* and—"

"Rita."

"—although Mistah Steel says once you add the cheese dust it can *just* get a little too rich—"

"Rita."

"—but if you ask me," I realise Jet's been sayin' my name all of a sudden, "Oh! Yeah, Mistah Jet?"

“I do not believe you are okay.”

I close my mouth. Then I open it again, and I wait for all the words that’re usually just kinda bouncin’ around in there to fall out. But none come. Which ain’t ever happened before, so I close my mouth again.

“Would you like to talk about it?” Jet asks.

And you know the funny thing? I don’t know if anybody’s ever asked me that before.

I dunno how to feel about that. To be honest, it kinda makes me uncomfy. I look back at the screen, “I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about, Mistah Jet, but that’s nice’a’ you to offer.”

“I will not press the issue,” Jet says slowly. “But know that I am here. It is not your job to be alright all the time.”

I snort at that. “It ain’t a job, Mistah Jet. I just like bein’ there for people, ‘s’all. There’s always gotta be someone to cheer other people up, or else we’d just all be sad!”

“The responsibility does not lie on one person alone,” Jet says. “You are a good friend, Rita, and the most cheerful person I have ever met. Even if something is bothering you, this fact will remain true.”

The interesting thing about Mistah Jet is that he notices things. He’s real good at it — noticing things and never sayin’ nothin’ about them. I dunno how he noticed that bein’ seen as cheerful is important to me, but I know nobody’s ever noticed that before.

I fold my hands in my lap and puff my cheeks out, “I don’t wanna be a downer.”

“I find that listening to the struggles my friends are going through often makes me feel better, not worse,” Jet counters. “Even if what they are saying is sad, I often find that knowing I am here for them is comforting.”

“That… makes a lotta sense, actually,” I murmur. Sometimes the things Mistah Steel used to say made me pretty sad, especially back in the HCPD days. But what was worse was when he got used to holin’ himself away and just makin’ me worry.

I look to the wall where, on the other side, Mistah Steel and Mistah

Ransom are all cuddled together. Then I look back down at my hands. Then I sigh.

"It's just… I mean, I'm real happy for Juno. I ain't seen him this happy for twenty-odd years, and that's a long time to be unhappy for. I'm real glad he's with Mistah Ransom, too! They're real sweet and just bein' around 'em makes me feel warm. But…"

"But, I dunno. I guess, back a long time ago, when the whole thing in Hyperion happened— It seemed like Mistah Steel and I was gonna be spending more time together, yanno? And… I liked that idea. Like, a lot. Cause Mistah Steel is my best friend ever."

I sigh. "He said he wouldn't leave if I didn't come with him. An' I thought even if it meant leavin' my apartment and my friends and that little bakery down the road all behind forever, if it was what Mistah Steel said it was what he needed, *especially* if it meant gettin' to spend time with him like I've always wanted to, I'd do it. Cause I've always done whatever Mistah Steel needed me to do for him. And then…"

"And then Ransom," Jet's deep voice rumbles.

"Yeah," I twist the end of my skirt in my hands. "And like I said, I'm real happy for them! It's just all'a a sudden, he ain't got time to hang out with me anymore cause he's always got somethin' planned with Ransom. And it makes me feel lonely in two kinda ways. Cause on one hand I'm sad I ain't spendin' time with my bestest friend, tied with you of course. And other times… well, a gal has her desires too, you know? And it's all very good for Buddy and Vespa and Peter and Juno, but… I get lonely too! And I ain't got any hope of findin' someone out here to care for me like that."

Jet's fuzzy grey eyebrows frown together. His lips press in a tight line. "I am sorry," he says, after some time, "That I can't give—"

"Oh, you've got nothin' to be sorry for, it ain't nothin' to do with you!" I wave him off, "It ain't about you, Jet. It's just somethin' that plays on my mind every once and again. And sometimes—Oh, I can't say it."

Jet stays frownin' at me. He reaches out and takes my lil hands in his big ones. I wrap my fingers around his thumbs. "Try anyway."

I look up at him, and my bottom lip trembles, "I don't want you to think I'm a terrible person, Mistah Jet. And I don't want you to think I don't love it here with you, I do! But sometimes I wish I was back on

Mars."

And then I do a real ugly thing — I start cryin'. And not in the fun way I do to get what I want sometimes, but actual cryin'. Because I can hardly believe what an awful friend I am, to admit out loud that sometimes I think of going back when I've been there for Mistah Steel for half his whole life. And then I'm so mad at myself for cryin', when I'm *Rita,* and I'm meanta be always okay.

Jet's big hands get under my arms, and then he heaves me right up off the bed. He lies back, and lies me on him.

Rita should yell somethin' about it not bein' decent to handle a gal that way, or maybe tickle him in that spot I know he's extra ticklish in. But I can't help but just lie there and cry into his big hoodie, and try and wrap my arms all the way across his chest.

"I'm sorry," I croak out, and wipe my eyes on a fisted ball of fabric from his hoodie, "I ain't like this usually, I'm sorry. I ain't even told Juno any of this before, it just kinda all came out like--" I try and think of a stream this is like. But I'm not in the mood for that. So I sniffle and say, "It just kinda all came out."

Jet pats me on the back, "Do you think it would help?"

I sniffle again, "Do you think what would help?"

"If you told Juno how you felt. I find that Juno tends to be somewhat oblivious. If he is used to your previous dynamic, which often consisted of him taking you for granted, he may not have realised that thinks have changed."

I lift my head from Jet's hoodie, "Do you think?"

"The problem with being cheerful all the time is that people tend not notice when they are causing you pain," Jet says. "It's likely Juno thinks you're perfectly happy with how things are."

I wipe my eyes again with the backs of my wrists, and then I slide off of Jet and sit up on the bed, "Maybe you're right. But I don't wanna make him feel bad! If he's just finally alright where he is, maybe it ain't fair of me to rock the boat."

Jet sits up on the bed as well. He considers me for a moment, "You are a good friend, Rita. You are very loyal, helpful, and determined to do anything you can to make the people you love happy. It is not selfish

to ask the people that love you for the same in return."

"You have given up a lot for Juno, but you do not exist solely for his comfort," he continues and there's a harder edge to his voice like he's grittin' his teeth or somethin. "It would be wise of him to recognise this more."

"Oh, please don't be mad at Mistah Steel!" I clutch onto Jet's hand, "He don't mean it or nothin'. Mistah Jet, if you'd seen where he was when I knew him a long time ago, you'd know why I trust things to be okay with him now."

"And I ain't as ditzy as I look. I know what I've done for him. But we've had plenty of good times, too, and we ain't always been distant! And anyway, every time I see him smile, I know there's a part of me that's caused that smile. And that's the best feelin' in the world. I wouldn't've stuck around if it wasn't worth it, Mistah Jet."

Jet makes a lil' 'hmph' sound in the back of his throat, but his shoulders slump. I breathe out a sigh of relief. It's real touchin' that Jet cares about me that much, but I'd hate to make him hate Juno.

"I'll pull him aside after dinner tomorrow, and tell him," I promise, and pat Jet's hand. "I really don't care if he spends heaps'a time with his boyfriend. I just want a movie night every now and then to make sure we're still all okay. Maybe he'll even agree to rewatchin' *No Dogs on the Moon.*"

Jet nods at me, but he still looks awful sombre. I try turnin' on a stream — this really cool one about pirates on Pluto in the 23rd century who've gotta solve a murder case — but even then he keeps frowning to himself.

I sigh, and pause the stream. "What's wrong, Mistah Jet?"

Jet's frown deepens. "What you said earlier, about having your own desires. I do not want you to feel lonely, Rita. It makes me upset to think that being on this ship makes you feel that way."

"Aw, Jet!" I throw a sushi-shaped cushion at him. It bounces off his face without his expression changin' at all. Then I snuggle myself up beside him. "You're real sweet, but that was only wishful thinkin'. To be honest with you, I dunno if I really do want that kinda romance." I turn and kiss the sleeve of his hoodie, "I ain't lonely. I love spendin' time with you, and I love spendin' time with Mistah Ransom even if we don't do it much. And I love Miss Buddy and Miss Vespa and how

this whole ship is like one big family! Besides, I got my streams for when I have those cravings. *Well,"* I snort-giggle, "Streams and a very good pair'a virtual reality glasses and a few expensive simulators. I'm happy."

"As long as you say that and mean it," Jet says.

"Of course I—!" and then I stop, cause I hear a loud sound that comes from behind the grey metal wall on the other side of the room — the one that separates our room from Mistah Ransom's.

Jet and I look at each other. Then I say, "How about a stream? Maybe if we turn it up enough, we'll distract them from what they're tryna do."

"I think that would be wise," Jet grumbles, and reaches for the remote.

I pick up one of my sushi cushions and put it behind my back. And then I reach for my eyepatch dog. I pass Jet a large sim-hamburger and a pink love heart. When we're all snuggled up enough, I scroll through the titles at hand.

"How far into *Curse of The Endless Lice* do ya think we could get before Mistah Steel and Mistah Ransom give up?" I ask, and waggle my eyebrows at him, "I got fifty creds on five minutes."

"I do not wish to gamble," Jet says.

"Well, alright. But I'm gonna treat myself to a whole bunch of snacks tomorrow if I'm right."

"That only seems fair," Jet agrees, and turns up the volume.

Chapter End Notes

tell me what u think >:3

Rita & Buddy: Ladies' Night Out

Chapter Summary

In which Rita's biggest dreams come true.

Chapter Notes

SORRY FOR HOW LATE THIS IS HUH! i'll publish another chapter in like 5hrs, then take a pause day, then the next 2 will come out on the 30th and 31st. sorry it's just assignment season and ur boy was an idiot and didnt finish 2 chapters until the last moment lmao

i wanted rita to have a chapter that wasnt just about her relationship w juno somehow and then . this completely absurd thing happened. it is a total fever dream of a chapter. hope you enjoy! lol

i love buddy. just so very much

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Allllllllright Captain A, I’m ready to go.”

Rita has dressed herself up to the nines. A long, rich dress encrusted with pink sequins, with a slit up the side. A white chain of pearls around her neck. Her make-up has been done with a signature flair I can attribute only to Peter Nureyev, a mid-blue and bold yellow eyeshadow behind her large glasses.

“I still don’t get why you two get to go surface side,” Juno grumbles into the table. He’s lying with his head in his arms, like a vaguely-criminal shaped puddle.

“I must say,” pipes up Nureyev himself, sprawled out along the couch rather like a ragdoll, “I can’t see why Juno and I couldn’t spare a few hours’ walk-around if you and Rita can. I haven’t gone for a proper walk in weeks.”

“We can’t afford to have over half the crew surface-side at the same time outside of heists. It’s basic logic, darlings,” I explain, and ignore Juno’s ‘hmph’. “Really. I would’ve thought the two of you would understand that by now.”

“Besides! You guys don’t get to join us cause you ain’t Captain A’s favourites, ain’t that right, Captain?” Rita asks, waggling her eyebrows up at me.

I smile back at her, and lie to her face. “Now, Rita: of course I don’t keep favourites.”

Juno snorts into his arms and I spare Rita what I hope is clearly a wink. “Shall we leave before we turn Juno and Peter positively green with envy? Think of it this way, darlings,” I say to them, “With Jet and Vespa sleeping, the two of you will virtually have the ship to yourselves.”

Juno’s head pops out of his arms. He glances at Pete.

“Well, then,” Peter says, sitting up slowly on the couch, his eyes darting between Juno and Rita and I, “I suppose you’ve got no time to waste. You’d better be heading off.”

“I thought as much. Well, Rita?” I turn to her and extend out my arm, “Shall we?”

“Ooh, I’m just so excited!” Rita squeals, and then catches herself. “I mean,” she gives me a curtsy, and then takes my arm, “You lead the way, Captain!”

Arm in arm, we leave the common room and head down towards the garage.

We haven’t been given permission to take the Ruby Seven, as amusing as it is that a Captain needs permission to use one of her own ship’s vehicles. But I understand the particular significance of that car and its ownership to Jet, and so our other car will have to do.

“So what’s the plan, Captain A?” Rita stage-whispers at me as we pull our seat-belts across ourselves.

“That’s up to you, darling. I do believe it was you who requested an evening on the town. And there’s no town nicer in the galaxy than Venetia.”

“Wooooooww,” Rita leans back in her car seat. “It’s beautiful.”

I press the button to start the airlock opening procedures, “We haven’t left yet, darling.”

“I know, Captain A! I’m just practisin’, ‘s’all. Anyway, do you really mean it? Can we really do whatever I want?”

I glance at Rita. Her little hands are clasped and she’s near vibrating in her seat with excitement. Her big brown eyes peer up at me through the magnified glass. She is all potential energy, a hair’s-breadth away from snapping and simply pinging off of the walls. All things said and done, she’s a hard person to say no to. And I must admit, there’s a part of me that’s rather curious as to what Rita constitutes as a night out.

“Anything you want,” I confirm to her, and wonder what on Earth we’ll be up to before the night is through.

There are glimpses of Hyperion City in Venetia’s skyline.

It’s only fitting, if you really think about it, that humanity’s final colonisation of a solar planet mirrors its first. But what Venetia has over Hyperion is a solid few centuries of development in the areas of architecture, design, and technology. Which is to say, that—

“It’s *be-auuuu-tiful,”* Rita gasps softly, both her hands pressed up against the glass.

“Aptly put, darling. All your practice on the way here paid off.”

It is night on Venetia. We skim over the main drag of the city, where neon lights arc up the sides of buildings and lights in deep shades of all colours raise up from the buildings closer to the street as though the city’s pavement itself breathes out a glowing, rainbow mist. The skyscrapers arc up, and the lower down we get, the more the music from the streets and its people below seeps through the car and into the air around us. A carved canal winds its way through the city, and small boats painted in light bob up and down on the water.

“Captain A, this is *amazing!”*

It’s the first major city people see when they come in from the Outer Rim. A tourist statement expertly designed to stir expectations that every city from here on out will be as glamorous as this one, and also be filled to the brim with expensive treats and rigged casinos and slick-talking debt-collectors enough that very few that make it here live to prove those expectations wrong.

“It’s best in small doses.”

“That doesn’t make any sense!” Rita says, without removing her hands from where they’re pressed up against the window still, “Hardly anything’s good in small doses, except for when you get those *teeny mini incey wincey* little cupcakes from the best bakeries, but even then you’re meanta eat them in at *least* groups of ten— Captain Aurinko, can we go on a boat? *Please? Please,* please, please, please, pleaaase?*”*

The car comes to rest gently on a parking tower just slightly out of the city centre. If there’s one thing going for this city apart from its looks, Venetia was at least built with large populations in mind. Finding a park is never the end of the world here; this fact alone places it several tiers above Hyperion.

“Of course, darling, if that’s what you want. The river Tartarus is one of Pluto’s major attractions, after all,” I turn the car off.

Rita doesn’t last half a second in her passenger’s seat. She rips off her seatbelt, and launches herself out of the car. “*Woo-oo-oo-ww!* Even the air smells good here, Captain A! Like— like— like *chocolate* and *cinnamon* and... Okay. Maybe we can go on a boat *after* we have a proper meal. I’m *real* hungry all of a sudden.”

All a part of its marketing. I take a moment to stretch when I leave the car, and let the atmosphere of Venetia envelop me. The thumping of bass and shouts from merchants and tourist groups alike don’t get any easier on the ears with age. From this angle, the shroud of colourful mist seems to be above, like a cover of faint rainbow cloud, polluting the sky and preventing us from seeing the stars beyond. I lower my eyes down in increments to give them half a chance to adjust.

Rita doesn’t seem to be worried about adjusting. The city itself already seems imprinted in the wide pupils of her eyes, a small soap-bubble snapshot of the scenery sticking to the lenses of her glasses. “I can’t believe it! I mean, I saw it on plenty’a streams and stuff, and everybody always told me — even Franny, you know, she’s been here once before, she did a big thing for her 40th a while back now only it really didn’t end up so great and *that’s* why she was in house-arrest for four weeks after she came back home and I had to go over *every day* just to make sure she’d done all her shoppin’ and do her laundry runs — but even all those stories ain’t *nothin’* like the real thing.”

I glance over the view in front of us again. From this level of the parking tower, we get to see the streets spread below us, the boats on the river to our left, and the tall casinos to our right. “Well, Rita?” I ask, “What kind of food are you hungry for?”

Rita turns to look at me, looking for all the world like she might just pop if she gets any more worked up. Her voice is the most serious I've ever heard it when she opens her mouth and says, "Everything."

A fifteen minutes' walk lands us at a large restaurant that boasts the largest variety of interplanetary foods in the solar system and beyond. The inside of the restaurant is made to look rather more like a club — there are lights sweeping the room, and apart from those sweeping beams of colour, and a single light suspended above each table, the restaurant itself is dark.

We get swept to our seats by a sleek, shining robot with a metallic smile. It sets us up for the largest buffet available and sends a wink Rita's way before gliding away from the table.

"Can we keep it?" Rita asks, for the next twenty minutes. "*Pleeaaasssee,* I promise I'd keep it in my room and you wouldn't even have to worry about cleanin' up after it! A bot like that could be real helpful, Captain A, and don't you even *try* and tell me you're above stealin' from a place like this."

The fixation on the robot waitrex goes away, when it's swept aside for the far more entertaining promise of a good meal. The table we have been ushered to is round, and as plates build up around the edges, it becomes clear that we are to rotate the table in order to try all the dishes without having to ask others for assistance. I'll give Pluto this — they're nothing if not good at knowing how to have a good time.

Rita tries a little something from everything. We eat until our stomachs are so full we can barely move. Then, Rita taps a fake cred-card against the reader, and with a ding and a tick and a flourish, we are on our way out of having had arguably the best free meal of our lives.

"Still up for that boat ride, Rita?" I ask her.

She clutches her stomach, "Ooh. I dunno, Captain A. That Ingarian Jelly didn't sit too right with me, I don't think. I'm not sure if I'm up to much mov—hey, what's with the big crowd over there!" Rita starts speed-walking over to the the waves of people starting to form a little way down the road.

As we draw closer, it becomes clear that many of the crowd are wearing similar shirts. Some are cheering, others waving frantically, and a further few have banners and signs. It dawns on me just before it dawns on Rita, and I hear her take in a breath so big I'm surprised

such big lungs could fit in such a little body. There comes a revving up sound from deep within her little chest.

“Aahhhooooh my God, they’re filming a *movie!”* Rita shrieks, “I’ve never been to a movie set before! Captain A, this is the best day of my life!”

Then she rounds on me, and a fierce determination lights up her whole face that seems, for a moment, to make the brilliant lights of the city around us dim. “Captain Aurinko,” Rita says, “You said we could do anything I want, right?”

“I did say that, didn’t I?”

A grin that’s almost a little frightening spreads across Rita’s face, and she points towards the crowd, “You’re gonna get me into part of that stream.”

Well. It wouldn’t be a day in the life of Buddy Aurinko if I weren’t pulled into some unlikely, over-the-top adventure. It’s simply a part of my charm.

“I beg your pardon. You’d… like me to do what?”

“Nothing overly complicated about it, Pete,” I say, pacing up and down the length of the trailer. It’s a very nice one, with red plush lining on the walls and a long pink sofa. A bar fridge beside the sofa and on one wall is a big vanity, in front of which is a box of accessories that Rita is combing through with a sort of intense glee. “Rita here says she can send all the relevant files to you through these comms. All *you* need to do is do what you do best — make up a character.”

There’s silence from the other side of the comms line for a while, then the rustling of some cloth, and Juno says, “Babe?”

Peter gives a little choked-off laugh, “And you can’t wait, say, fifteen minutes? You need this right now?”

“Captain’s orders,” I inform. I sit down on the end of the sofa and throw one leg over the other. The unconscious body of the star this trailer previously occupied jostles a little with the movement. “I trust that won’t be a problem, Pete. After all, if you’ll recall, I made time to have a conversation with you some weeks ago even though I was… preoccupied. I expect you’re able to return the courtesy.”

“The fuck does that mean?” Juno’s voice whines a little petulantly.

“It’s… I’ll explain later,” Peter mumbles to him, and then sighs heavily, “…Alright, Captain. You’re right. I’ll… get on that right away.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Juno murmurs.

“I never joke,” I remind the two of them. “Thank you for being so understanding, Pete. You’re a delight. I’ll send through the appropriate files. I’ll trust you won’t let me down.”

“I just can’t see how this is relevant to our mi—”

I end the call, and glance over at Rita, who is now furiously typing into her comms, “How are you feeling, darling?”

“Only like this is the best day of my life ever, ever, ever, *ever*!” she crows, and leaps off the ground. She seems to be trembling faintly all over even when she lands, “Captain A, you are the *coolest, best* captain I’ve ever had.”

“Well, I’m certainly honoured to have made the cut.”

She flutters around the trailer, buzzing from one spot to the next like a dragonfly until her comms beep. She lets off a sound like tires spinning against the ground and dives for her comms. She’s the quietest she’s been all afternoon as she stares at her screen, a rare picture of stillness.

I can’t say I’m not a little excited, myself. I lean closer, “Well?”

“It’s…” she says softly, “It’s… *perfect*! It’s perfect! Ohhh, if Mistah Nureyev weren’t Mistah Steel’s, and frankly far too young for me, I’d kiss him for this!” she leaps up from the couch and starts pacing up and down the room, typing rapidly on her comms, “Alright, now all I gotta do is hack into the comms channel they’re using to communicate, send a message notifying them of the script and casting change, send this file through—and—and!!” she squeals with delight, “I’m gonna be a *movie star!”* Then she stops, and spins on her heel to face me, gasping, “Captain A, you’ve *gotta* help me practise! I ain’t ever acted in anything before!”

“Rita,” I stand up from the couch, “as the club leader of my primary school, high school, *and* college’s drama club, it would be my pleasure.”

“Well? How’d it go?”

“Mmmnnph!” Rita squeals in response, and takes off down the hallway to run headlong into Peter’s body.

He yelps and stumbles backwards, “That’s a good thing, I take it?”

“Ohhh, *you!”* Rita shouts, and grabs fistfuls of the shirt of Juno’s that he’s wearing, pulling him down to cover his face in red-lipstick smooches.

“She did a stellar job, darling,” I walk over to the two of them, watching with amusement as Rita wraps her arms around Peter’s neck, folding him near in half with how he needs to stretch, “And the character you invented suited her perfectly. I couldn’t have done a better job myself.”

Rita finally releases Peter from her death grip and turns to Juno, who is sulking by the kitchen counter, “Mistah Steel, I brought you back *all sorts* of things, they’re all in the car and you’re gonna have to help me bring them back here but!” she produces something from a tote bag on her shoulder and throws it at him.

Juno catches it, and lets it unfurl in his hands. “Is this…?”

“Your very own *RRRRRRita* merchandise!” Rita shouts, “This handy little shirt is full replicated cotton, is laundry safe, dishwasher safe, microwave safe *and* fire retardant! It comes with a handy little code printed on the inside that you can scan with your comms to unlock downloadable prints! Ain’t it the best thing you’ve ever seen in your life, Mistah Steel?”

Juno turns the shirt around to hold it up against himself. It’s white, with a caricature of Rita on the front. “How did you…?”

“Simple! I only reprogrammed some of the scanners in the merch department for the studio from a remote location and then programmed a drone bot to fly this shirt all the way here just for you, and now a hundred, million people all across the solar system are gonna know my name!”

“Does… it not occur to anyone that this may not have been the wisest choice in terms of the anonymity of our crew?”

The three of us turn to look at Nureyev. He blinks, and puts his hands

up, “Alright. I stand down.”

“The movie ain’t gonna be out for at least another year, so we got plenty of time ta steal the Curemother and be even *more* famous! But don’t worry!” she adds, “I’m plannin’ on putting on a one-time only special event live performance of my lines! It’ll be held in the common room, in about…” she squints, “Oh… twenty minutes? So make all your snacks and come join in!”

Then Rita skitters out of the room, back to her room to go get prepared.

Juno pulls the shirt over his head. While he’s pulling his arms through, he says, “How many lines did you give her, Nureyev?”

Peter shrugs, “About five?”

Juno’s head pops out of the head hole as he pulls the shirt down, “What.”

Chapter End Notes

comment if u support rita's stream career

Juno & Rita: A Ladies' Day In (A Tale of Two Older Friends)

Chapter Summary

In which Juno and Rita spend some time together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When I first realised I would be leaving Mars for-maybe-ever and travelling across the stars with a group of highly-acclaimed space pirates and my own grumpy lady of a boss, my first thought was *Rita: you have got to find the best spa in the solar system*.

Okay, so maybe it wasn't really. But the point is there ain't much better you can get outta interplanetary travel than luxury, and I've been dreaming of this moment ever since Buddy and Jet bought us that little dayspa on Callisto all those months ago.

We're all having a spa-day. Everybody has brought their favourite things for relaxin': music machines and beauty products and the like. I brought the two most important things: my salmon snacks, and Mistah Steel's favourite colours of nail polish: pink, purple, and blue.

We're all in matching white bathrobes, fluffy as sewer-rabbit coats. All of us except for Mistah Nureyev, that is, who apparently thinks himself high-and-mighty enough to bring his own kimono: light blue with little pink and white flowers, and real Earth silk. It's probably more expensive than the worth of this whole place, which means it's probably stolen. And it's not that I mind Mistah Nureyev or the fact that half the stuff he owns technically belongs to someone else, cause he's real nice and we're, like, best friends, but he ain't thieving Juno from me today. I ain't got nobody else to spend the time with! Buddy and Vespa have already claimed a room, and Jet already thinks I'm spendin' the day with Mistah Steel and decided to use the time to design a new meditation technique.

Which is why, when I see Mistah Steel try and sneak off down the hallway with Mistah Nureyev, I stand my ground.

"Okay, Mistah Steel," I walk right up to him, looping one of my arms around one of his, "I got us our room all set up and I'm lookin'

forward to spendin' the day with you!"

Okay. *Maybe* I promised Mistah Jet that I'd go talk to Juno about the way he makes me feel and all, and talk about spendin' some more time together. And I really respect Mistah Jet's advice, and I one hundred percent meant to do it, I swear! But… well, the whole way Mistah Steel and I work is that we don't talk about me much! Or more, I don't really like talking about me, ever, and if Mistah Steel is happy that's what matters to me.

So. *Maaaaybe* I kinda forgot a little. But it's fine, because he ain't gotta hear all my sad stuff. I can just grab onto him and yank him away and force him to spend time with me – same as we always used to do.

"Oh, hey Rita," Juno says. He gives me a little guilty grin that tells me I ain't gonna get him to come along so easily, and that's *fine* because I get it, but that doesn't mean I'm just gonna give up. "Right," he says. "Uh… sorry, Rita, but, um. Well, Nureyev and I already have a room going—"

"Nuh-uh, Mistah Steel! You listen to me: ever since you came back from that sewer you *promised* me you'd never take advantage of our friendship again, and here I was thinkin' we'd spend *all* this time together, but then within twenty-four hours of getting' aboard this ship you and Mistah Nureyev were makin' eyes at each other and now I ain't even get to see you anymore! It ain't fair!"

Uh oh. That all wasn't meant to come out. Now Juno looks even more guilty, and a part of me wants to apologise. But, well. I mean, I *had* been meanin' to say it. I just hadn't meant to… shout it so much.

"She's right, dear," Mistah Nueryev puts his hand on Mistah Steel's shoulder and I hold my breath so I don't stop him from talkin'.

"Yeah," Juno mumbles, "But I thought you said we had to talk about —"

"I wouldn't want to come between the two of you. You know I'd never want that," he soothes, "We can come back here any time. A lady as lovely as Miss Rita deserves some time with her best friend, don't you think?"

(He's right.) Juno looks unconvinced. "Will you be alright on your own?"

"Perfectly, you know that. I have more than enough to think about. It

might be a good opportunity for me to work through some things that have been on my mind."

Juno sighs, "Well. Alright, then."

"Yes!" I almost leap outta my skin, and Juno stumbles as I yank him along, "Yes, yes, yes! You hear that, Mistah Second-Best? Mistah Steel has always got time for *Rita*! Best of the best! Ultimate friend! Mistah Steel's favourite crew-member!"

"Rita—Stop it," Juno sounds all embarrassed, but Peter just laughs a bubblin' kinda laugh and grins a sharp grin.

"I concede!" he calls out, "Clearly, you are the better of Juno's acquaintances. I'm sorry for ever attempting to steal your crown: how utterly foolish of me."

"Don't you forget it!" I shout, and then I drag Mistah Steel down the hall towards the room I picked out for us.

"Alright, Rita," Juno sighs as I push him into the room and close the door behind us, "What have you got in mind for today?"

"Well! I brought all our favourite snacks, Mistah Steel, and a little towel so we can dry our fingers before we get all our favourite snacks wet, and I brought your favourite nail polish and all my makeup and most of all!" I grin at him, "I brought my wonderful self, and you and I got some catchin' up to do."

He smiles at me, "Yeah. You're right, Rita, we do. I'm sorry it's been a while."

I snort, "Don't worry, Mistah Steel, it ain't like me to judge someone for gettin' distracted by a pretty boy. Or pretty girl. Or pretty anyone, really. Why has everyone gotta be so damn pretty all the time?"

"Beats me. I've wondered that all my life."

"Well? Get into ya swimming clothes, Mistah Steel!" I take off my bathrobe. Underneath it, I'm wearing my brightest, frilliest bathers – Buddy and Vespa bought 'em for me at the Neptune Central Swimming Centre, and they're all yellow and red and blue and green and pink in all kinds of shapes all over. Mistah Steel stares at me.

"Rita…" he says. "You do realise the whole point of this bathrobe is that you're naked underneath, right? That literally nobody else

brought bathers?"

I go wide-eyed, "Oh no. Nuh-uh, Mistah Steel. Tell me you're wearin' clothes under there."

He glares at me, "I just said that literally *nobody else* brought bathers."

"Well then you're gettin' in in your bathrobe!"

"*What?"*

"I went *twenty years* without havin'ta' see you naked, Mistah Steel, and I ain't startin' now, I don't care *who* else—if all your friends jumped off a cliff naked would you—ahh!" I cover my eyes as he drops his bathrobe.

Juno laughs, "I was kidding, Rita. You're easier to rile up than *me*."

I make sure I peer at him through my fingers before I trust him enough to pull my hands away.

"Wow, Mistah Steel. Where'd you get those?!"

Juno is wearing a matchin' bra and underwear in soft pink, all lacey like and fancy. He grins at me and poses with one hand on his hip, the other shoulder drawn up to his ear, his gaze cast down like one of those ladies in a magazine, "Nice, right? Nureyev bought them for me." He poses in a different position and then grins at me again, letting his limbs go slack. "I didn't like them at all at first," he admits, "Thought they made me look stupid. Plus, I didn't think the colour suited me. But, uh…" then he gives me a different kinda grin, the one with eyes half lidded and one eyebrow quirked he always does before he makes some kinda awful innuendo, "Nureyev found a way to change my mind."

Ew. Well, that's alright, long's they've been washed in the last few days, which I wouldn't really trust if it was just Mistah Steel but Mistah Nureyev don't seem like the kinda guy to fall behind on chores. I push the thought outta my mind.

"Now come on," Juno says, and he slides into the spa, the water closin' over him right up to his chest, "What're you waiting for, Rita? Geez, it's like you don't even *want* to spend any time with your best friend."

"Shut *up*, Mistah Steel," I kick some water at him as I get into the spa

and he squeals like a baby sewer rabbit, wiping at his eye.

“Hey! That’s not fair! You always tell me ‘no splashing’!”

“That’s cause splashin’ ain’t nice, Mistah Steel, and it ain’t proper to do it to someone as nice as me,” I tell him. I scoot over in the water so that I’m sitting right beside him, and batter my lashes right up at him, “So whaddya wanna do first?”

He glares at me for a moment, wipes his eye again, and says, “Fine. Let’s get into these snacks,” -- and see, this is why we’re still friends after all this time, because Juno always makes the right decisions in the end.

Beside the crater are two yellow packets, three green ones, and four bright pink. Between the two of us we demolish a few packets of the pink salmon chips and yellow cheese twisties.

“Thesh’ are disghushtin’—you ever looked at what they put in these?” Juno holds up a twisty in his fingers and squints at it like it’s one of the bad art pieces he used to have up on his walls. “Nureyev doeshn’t let me anywhere near ‘im if I’ve eaten ‘em. Not without brushing my teeth firsht.”

Well that’s alright with me, I think, so I push the twisties a little closer to him. He ain’t even think about it, he just starts eating them.

Juno crunches down a few more and then he turns to look at me, frowning, “Hey. You don’t hate Nureyev, do you?”

My eyes go wide, “What?”

Juno cringes. He shrugs a shoulder. He uses his hands while he’s talkin’, which I only ever see him do when he really means what he’s tryna say. He even finishes chewin’ properly and swallows before he continues, “I dunno. I didn’t mean it like that, I just… We haven’t really talked about it properly, I guess? And your opinion means a lot to me.”

He sighs, “I… know I have… a tendency not to… communicate. And make you worry more than you should. And you’ve… seen how my relationships can be, and you don’t usually trust anybody I date. I mean, it seems like you really like him! Which makes me super happy. But I can’t stop worrying that you’re secretly upset.”

Juno taps at the water with his hands for a bit, his face all furrowed

into a frown like he ate somethin' sour, and then he shrugs, "I guess I want you to know, if you really didn't like him, didn't trust him for some reason… I'd listen to you."

He looks at me head on, "You know that, right? If it came down to it, Rita, if you really didn't like him... I'd trust you. I'd even break up with him, if that's what it meant. You're more important to me than any pretty face. So if there's anything you want to ask me about—things, I guess, or him, or me, that would help you get a better picture of how things are…"

Then his face changes from all serious to terrified, "Oh, shit—don't cry, Rita, I'm so sorry—"

"You better be!" I shout at him through my tears, wipin' my eyes, "You made my makeup run, Mistah Steel, and I did it extra nice especially for you."

"Why *did* you wear makeup to a—"

"It's just-- it's just--" I sniffle, and then turn my voice down a little to talk to him properly, "I think you really realised your worth recently, Mistah Steel, and it makes me so happy that you finally understand what we all see in you, and how much you mean to us all."

Juno stops. Then he sinks back into the water, and smiles, "Thanks, Rita."

I glare at him, "Not so fast. Whaddya mean by me being more important than 'any pretty face', huh? Ain't my face pretty enough for you?"

Juno laughs, and it sounds extra air-filled like somehow he'd been holdin' back a big breath at the same time as talkin' that much. He leans over me to reach to the side of the spa where I have all our supplies, and then leans back with a facewipe, handing it out to me. "Sorry. Any *other* pretty face. And…. do you, um… well, if you want, I could try and do your makeup again?"

This is the maybe the most precious moment of my life.

I wipe the rest of my makeup off and then Mistah Steel searches through the kit I brought with me.

"You know you chose, like, literally the worst location to do each other's faces in, right?" he asks.

“Well, it ain’t like you were gonna hang out with me any other time, so I had to try and do it all at once!”

Mistah Steel makes a soft, tsking sound with his tongue and shuffles closer to me. He puts one of his hands against my chin. His fingers are rough, but his touch is real gentle, and he’s warm like he always is. That was one of the main reasons I became such good friends with Mistah Steel. He’s like a hot water bottle on those rare nights he lets you get close enough to cuddle with him. I close my eyes and feel the brush of eyeshadow against my eyelids.

“You’re right. I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m… really sorry, Rita. I promised you I was going to change this time, huh?”

“You did change!” I argue, “You promised me you’d never disappear off without tellin’ me anymore, or make me worry, and you don’t. And I know you wouldn’t, Mistah Steel.”

“Yeah,” he says, but he doesn’t sound that happy. “But still. I got so caught up in all that drama with Nureyev… I shouldn’t have just pushed you aside. I’ll do better. I’ll make sure we have a stream night within the week, okay? Can’t be tonight, I’m on cooking, but I won’t let you down.”

He finishes with one eye and then does the other. I can tell his hand has shaken a little but that’s okay. “I know, Boss,” I promise him. “You’re a changed lady now, remember? You don’t break your promises.”

He huffs out a breath that could be a laugh, and I’m pretty sure he’s just a little flustered. He ain’t used to positive reinforcement.

“So…” Juno says.

“What?”

“Was there… anything you wanted to ask? Hey—don’t frown like that, you’re gonna mess up my aim.”

“Well I’m sorry I’m thinkin’!” I tap my hands against the surface of the water and make little splashy sounds while I think about it. “Alright. I got an important question. Are you happy, Mistah Steel?”

The sound Juno makes then is definitely a little laugh. “Yeah,” he says. “I mean. I’ve been a lot happier, in general, than I think I ever have been since Benten—since I was a kid. But if you mean, like,

specifically with Nureyev? Then… yeah. Yeah, I am. He's… kind, and loving, and patient, and knows when is too far, and he's never hit me, even in sex, which—" he laughs again, a bit drier, "Which I guess is a pretty low standard to have."

"Hey," it takes me a second, what with my eyes bein' closed, but I reach around for a bit until I put my hand on his chest. "It's an important standard, alright? Maybe *the* most important one. And it's one you ain't always had."

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right." There's a pause, "What kind of eyeliner do you want? Wings or no wings?"

"Your pick, boss."

Juno's hums for a moment, and then says, "Okay. Wings it is."

The eyeliner is liquid, and it's cold when he puts it on, but I manage not to flinch. He concentrates hard for a while we sit in silence apart from the sounds of the water bubbling.

"I ain't that worried," I reassure him, once I'm sure he ain't gonna mess up my eyeliner too bad, "I always knew you was gonna end up happy, Mistah Steel, you ain't the kinda lady to lie down and die. You might've liked to think you were, but you weren't."

"Yeah. I know," Juno says.

"And he seems good to you. At first I wasn't too sure, since I know how you tend to tell me everything's fine with your lady-and-gentle-friends even when they ain't. So I kept an eye out. But after a while I stopped worryin'. I really think you'd know how to say no to that sorta thing now. And plus, he likes all my streams and is real good at makeup, which if you think about it kinda makes him more qualified than you to be my best friend, so you're lucky nobody could ever replace you."

Mistah Steel's hands leave my face, "Hey--"

"And plus plus," I add, "I already had a talk to Mistah Nureyev just to make sure he's got good intentions towards you."

"You *what*?!"

I open my eyes just in time to see Mistah Steel knock three cheese twisties outta the open packet on the side of the crater we're sittin' in

and into the water.

"*Juno!* Gross!" I scoop them up and put them on the side of the crater, "Now there's cheese dust in the water!"

"No, hold on, you did *what?* When did this happen? Was this—oh my God," Juno puts the eyeliner down and puts his hands to his face, "Rita! You gave my boyfriend a heart attack! He spent like an hour a couple of weeks back in a nervous fit – he was convinced he'd done something wrong!"

"Oh," I say. I hadn't thought little old Rita could really scare someone that much, especially not a master thief like Juno's boyfriend. But maybe, I think, it wasn't me he was scared of, but of the idea of hurting Juno, and that makes me real happy. It's been a long time since Mistah Steel has been with someone I can confidently say has been worried about that.

Juno groans and leans his head back against the crater. I smile and shuffle closer to him, "Well. In that case, I'm glad."

"Glad you scared the shit outta him?"

"No. Just glad you're together. Do you think you might love him, boss?"

I hear Juno's breath hitch. He looks at me for a moment. A couple different looks cross his face, before he settles on smilin' softly. It's a kind of smile I haven't seen on his face, not really, since the early days with Diamond, which kinda makes my heart ache a little, and not in the fun way. I know he ain't gonna get his heart broken like that again, but even the thought can make a girl scared.

"I think I do," he says at last. "I… really think I do."

"You should tell him that," I pass Juno another packet of salmon chips.

"Not sure I know how to," Mistah Steel mutters, "Last person I worked up the guts to tell I loved them was Diamond, and it's been twice has hard to say it since. Those words… they just don't come as easily to me as to others, okay?"

"You should tell him that, too," I say. "Mistah Steel. Who knows when you're gonna get the opportunity to feel like this about someone again? If you can't say it all the time, Mistah Nureyev is gonna

understand, but that's better than leavin' him wondering whether you feel for him the same way he feels for you. I've seen the way he looks at you, and it's just like Katie in *Rodent Attack on Jupiter* and just like Xuan in *Plutonian Mites: The Feature Film* and especially like Abhimanyu in *Empire of The Land Where Romance Was Banned*. The point is, I think Mistah Nureyev loves you too, boss, and everybody knows that in all the streams if two people love each other and don't say it they always end up with one of them dying before the other one can. And I don't want that to happen to you!"

"Gee, thanks, Rita," Juno says sarcastically. He trails his hands through the water for a moment and then adds, "I mean. Actually. Thanks. For your concern."

"It's no problem, boss, as long as you remember your old pal Rita when it comes down to deciding how to decorate the weddin'!"

Juno laughs again, but this time it comes out strained and nervous, and usually I'm so good at not mentioning topics related to Diamond and especially not that topic in particular that it takes me a second to realise why.

"Unless," I say quickly, "You ain't never gonna get married, which is totally fine by the way Mistah Steel, I don't think Miss Vespa and Captain Aurinko are ever gonna get married on accounts of them bein' thieves and not able to go to any legal registry places and all—"

"Nureyev's a thief, too, Rita, remember?" Juno cuts me off, and he sounds a little upset so I stop talkin' real fast. "I don't think a wedding's on the table either way."

The water bubbles in silence for a while.

"Anyway!" Juno says suddenly, "We've only been together for, like, three months. What the hell are we doing talking about *that*? What's been going on for you, Rita?"

"Oh, you don't wanna hear about that—"

"Course I do," Juno interrupts, and he looks at me strangely. "Come on. I'll paint your nails. You tell me what you've been up to."

So I tell him about my latest call with Franny, all the way from Hyperion City. I tell him how that one cinema we used to go to all the time has been knocked down to make room for a new ice-skating rink, which gets us on to a conversation about the time in high-school I had

a date with this boy and we went ice-skatin' only his ma showed up half-way through which is how I found out he was actually my mum's biggest enemy's kid and that made every interaction from then on awkward. He paints my nails in bright pink and lets me paint his in return. We talk about Mick Mercury and his new screen-writin' business he thinks will really go well, and about the fake name he used to protect Juno's identity and how dumb it sounds and how obvious it is.

I do his eyeliner and then we finish off the rest of the snacks and return back to old arguments about streams we ain't watched in five years, and we talk about what livin' in space has been link for two gals who hadn't travelled much before this whole thing.

I dunno how long it's been, but it's gotta have been at least an hour or two before we run out of breath and just sit back next to each other and relax.

It... feels really nice, actually. My heart feels all glowy and full.

"Thanks, Rita," Mistah Steel says softly after a while.

I hug his arm and rest my head against his shoulder, "For what, Mistah Steel?"

"For being my best friend," Juno says. He turns to look at me. He hesitates for a moment, and then he smiles, leans over, and presses a big kiss to my cheek. "I love you," he says.

"Mistah Steel!" I gasp, pushin' away from him, "You've got a *boyfriend!*"

"What?" Mistah Steel stares at me, wide-eyed, and then his jaw drops, "Oh—Jesus, Rita, I wasn't—I didn't mean it like—!"

Which is when I start cacklin', and Juno groans, leaning back, "You scared the shit outta me," he grumbles.

"Don't worry, Mistah Steel," I lean over and kiss him right back on the cheek, "I love you, too."

"Right," he mumbles, and glances away from me. Little steps – he still ain't all that good at sustainin' vulnerability but I know how to work with it.

And anyway, somethin' makes me feel like, for maybe the first time

since I knew him, things really are gonna keep gettin' better for Mistah Juno Steel.

Chapter End Notes

TWO CHAPTERS TO GO, Y'ALL!!! :O!!!!!!

i wrote this one so early on that with the way the fic changed over time i had to end up deleting a hilarious scene, but i'm gonna put it on my twitterrr! so if you havent come here from there, follow me at @onetiredb0y !

Vespa & Buddy (Buddy & Vespa): Love At Its Finest

Chapter Summary

In which two people are learning to fall in love all over again.

Chapter Notes

one chapter to go!! can you believe it'll all be over tomorrow??
it's almost heartbreaking! :'(

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Well, doctor? What’s the outcome?”

Vespa’s face does that delightfully charming little thing she does when she tries to hold back a smile, quirking in one wrinkled corner even as her brows draw closer in faux-frustration, and I’m glad to report that a second later she fails altogether, “Stop. You sound like when we first got together and you made me play out that *stupid* doctor-patient roleplay.”

She draws a delighted laugh out of me, “That’s right. Now *that* was a night to remember. It would’ve been far more fun for both of us if you hadn’t committed so completely to the role, love.”

“What can I say? I’m a good doctor,” Vespa folds her arms and quirks an eyebrow at me, waiting for a refusal she knows I won’t give.

No use in denying it. I reach up to cup her gaunt face in my hands, trace the lines I didn’t get to be there to see form with my thumb, “Yes, you are. A very good doctor. My favourite, as it happens.”

Vespa rolls her eyes and shrugs my hands away from her, “Would be better if you’d let me do my job…”

“Now, why would I do a thing like that?”

“Bud...”

And that’s where Vespa’s tone tells me she means business. I sigh, and reluctantly let her step back out of my arms. She raises a hand to my hair. I try not to notice the way her fingers hesitate when she pushes it up and away, gently behind my ear. I try to ignore the way I feel

suddenly naked.

The only sound for a moment is the clicking of my mechanical eye.

Vespa is good at putting on a professional face. I don't know why that unnerves me more than it should. She looks over me without judgement, as any good doctor should. But there's still a part of my heart that feels pinched. Is she upset? Does it hurt her to look at? Can she barely stand the way it sits in my face? God, if nothing else, I hope she doesn't do something as stupid as feel sorry for me.

Buddy Aurinko is good at giving advice, but not so much following her own. Peter Nureyev may have been inspired to let the curtain fall on his life-long act with my words of wisdom, but I am half as much a performance as he is. The sweet-talking captain, always suave, always quick to adjust. Never humiliated, never insecure.

"Alright," Vespa sighs, "Let's see what we can do."

She dips two of her fingers into a moisturiser beside the bed and then lifts them to the scarred side of my face. The first touch is gentle; I hiss anyway, in anticipation. She falters, "Does that hurt?"

I laugh, a little tightly, "No, love, I'm just… hyper-vigilant."

Vespa worries her lip between her teeth. You know, I do think the first pick-up line I ever used on her might have been something to do with that habit. I'd been bleeding out on her hospital table — perhaps that's dramatic, let me clarify: only metaphorically. Literally, it had been more like I'd spent one too many of my spare hours faking an injury in the infirmary of the rebel base we co-inhabited, and she'd finally called me out, and I'd been forced to pour out my heart. She always was good at seeing right through me.

"You haven't been taking care of this," Vespa mutters quietly, her fingers rubbing cream gently into the scars, "You should've been moisturising every day."

"It just wasn't the same without you there to do it, dear."

Vespa's jaw tightens. I remember a second too late that Vespa has an awful habit of blaming herself for things. She takes her fingers from my face to top up on the cream.

It's hard to admit to her just everything I went through. That I let myself melt away waiting for her, knowing that any life without her

would be worse than all the radiation damage the Martian sun could possibly give me. I've always been one for choosing drama over safety. I could tell her that trying to recover from the burns was too hard, that with my eye lost already and my face mangled beyond repair, and the overwhelming state of desperation and hopelessness I was in, I simply *couldn't* care what happened to me. But she'd only find a way to bring it all upon herself.

We'll talk about it one day, all the time we spent apart. But she and I are too busy recovering from that now to trudge back through it all again just yet. For now, we focus on the new future, as best as we can.

She finishes treating my burns with tender fingers, soothing the crusted skin and making the scars just that tiny bit less stiff on my face.

"Alright?" she asks, pulling her hand away from my face.

I catch her wrist, and kiss the back of her hand, "Thank you, love."

She gives me something of a weak smile, and leans in to kiss my forehead. "Just my meds to go, then," she says.

"This is quite nice, you know," I tell her, as she turns away from me to unscrew her anti-psychotic and oestrogen pills. She's been trying to go longer between shots from what little of the Curemother we have left — she and I both know she'll have to be her healthiest closer to the big heist, and we can't afford running out of medication before we have the chance to get any more. "A little time together, indulging in a little medical care."

"You and your thing with medical fantasies…" Vespa mumbles, and then tips her head back to take the pills.

"I think you'll find that's all on you, love," I catch her arms when she lowers them and tug softly, manoeuvring her back between my legs. I wrap my arms around her waist, which has gotten as thin as mine has the opposite over our time apart. IV feeding, as it turns out, is not as slimming as one might think. Especially not if one is partial to a nice glass of wine once or twice a night.

Vespa places her hands on my shoulders. Then she lifts one up to stroke through the hair pinned back behind my ear.

It's quiet in the infirmary aboard the Carte Blanche. Rita, Jet, and Juno are watching movies, I believe. Pete retired early tonight to

prepare for one of our upcoming missions. It's just Vespa and Buddy, Buddy and Vespa, in our own little corner of the ship, as she leans in to press a kiss to my forehead just where the scars end.

I bury my head into her shoulder and hold her close to me. We hold close in that embrace until Vespa flinches away, and steps out of my arms.

"I'm going to pack up the infirmary," she grunts. "You can go back to bed, if you'd like. I'll see you in there."

I stand up from the gurney, "Would you like my help with packing up?"

Vespa shakes her head shortly without looking my way. She's already starting to be absorbed in her routine, and I know better than to interfere. As difficult as it is to step away when she closes off, I know she needs her space and time to regain the strength she needs to have to be relaxed and open.

I walk to the door of the infirmary before turning back. "Vespa, love?"

She makes a soft 'mm?' sound, her back to me and her hands busy packing her hundreds of tiny instruments back into their respective places.

"Would you like to watch a movie tonight?" I ask her. "You know, it's been such a long time since we last watched *15 Lowring Lane* together, it's positively criminal."

Vespa laughs shortly. Her hands still, and after a moment, she turns. "We are criminals, Bud."

"This is a crime against crime itself," I counter. "Are you watching it with me, or not?"

She looks me over for a moment. Then she shrugs one shoulder and laughs in an embarrassed kind of way, "Not sure if there's a part of me left who can believe in that kind of romance, anymore."

Well. That certainly hurts. I know what she means — we have both been through *so much* by now, that the idea of sitting down and watching the same carefree romance comedy that inspired our blossoming love so many years ago seems so distant it's inaccessible. But perhaps I am more sentimental than I lead on, because the idea of giving up that part of our relationship — that careless joy and wonder

and hope — after what it meant to us then…seems impossible as well. But then, I have always been a dreamer.

“I see,” is all I say. “Well, then. I’ll… see you in bed, love.”

“See you,” she says, and won’t meet my eye as I turn from the infirmary.

I have always been the more romantic out of the two of us, this is a fact (although there was a time where I could say I felt very close to evenly matched). But recently, our efforts to restore our relationship to what it once was have been… stalled, by Vespa’s ongoing struggle with intimacy, emotional and otherwise. Don’t doubt me for an instant: I know Vespa loves me dearly, I could never think differently. But it hurts every single time the evidence of our differences can be so vividly felt.

It’s not that I fear she isn’t as romantic with me as I’d like. I may like romance, but I am also a grown woman with the sense to understand that any serious relationship means far more than romance. It’s that I can tell she wants to be, and she can’t, and it hurts her as much as it does me. Especially when I can’t sweep her up in my arms and hold her close through it, but must instead give her her space to struggle with it on her own.

It’s hard not to be frustrated, as much as I know I shouldn’t be. Frustration, like anger, like jealousy, are all emotions that stem from others. It’s perfectly alright to feel them, but to act on them rather than on the underlying primary cause often ends in pain for both parties. I am frustrated with my helplessness, not with Vespa. I must learn to let myself stand aside and be patient when I can, and when I need reassurance and comfort from her, I must be sure not to take too much, and to work within her boundaries. Relationships are always about compromise. In a funny way, helping Juno and Peter through their own issues with communication and intimacy have helped remind me of that.

And these stupid tears won’t fix a damn thing. I wipe them away efficiently and stop off at our quarters to get my toiletries. I brush my teeth in the bathroom and remove my face in the cramped bathroom mirror, and, after a glance at the shower, decide to force whoever is unlucky enough to be on cleaning duty in the morning to scrub it down before I wash myself in it.

I’m back in our quarters, changing into the silk pyjama pants Vespa

stole for me all those years ago, and a shirt that is baggy and comfortable enough to sleep in, when I hear the door open.

I can hear Vespa sit on the end of the bed. I stay still in the cupboard, and spend a moment pulling myself properly together. Breathe in, hold, then breathe out.

I walk out of the cupboard again. “All packed up, love?” I greet.

Vespa looks up at me with worried eyes, and it takes all I have not to dive into her arms. “Yeah,” she says.

Try as I might to keep it from bleeding into the room, tension will always find a way to prevail. Human beings are simply not designed to keep things from one another. That’s why it takes giving up the experience of being human itself, as Pete had to, to maintain the sort of distance necessary to pull it off.

There is only so long I can patter around the room, so I don’t bother. I sit down on the bed beside her, “How are we on touch?”

“Yellow,” Vespa mutters, and so I reach out and take one of her hands in mine.

“Would you like to talk about it, love?”

She shakes her head, and then lifts the back of her wrist to wipe at her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she rasps out. “I love you, Bud.”

I squeeze her hand and lean over to press a gentle kiss to her cheek, “I love you, too. There’s nothing for you to be sorry for. You’re trying your best, dear, and so am I. There’s nothing more we could ask of each other.”

She sniffles. We sit for a moment, and I say, “Well. There’s no use in us moping around like this. What would you like to do? I propose a *grand* sleep in, followed by making Juno and Jet, who are arguably our best cooks, make us an *extravagant* breakfast, which I will watch you eat with just a terrible amount of jealousy, and then I will spend the day with you being treated like royalty by the rest of the crew. What say you to that?”

“I say you’ll be lucky to get Steel awake enough in time for him to cook breakfast without burning the eggs,” Vespa grunts, and then she leans back into my side.

“Bud,” she says, after a moment.

“Yes, love?”

Vespa sits up properly, “There is… *something* I want to do.”

I try not to let my surprise show on my face. A second later, I have to hide my joy from showing as well. Vespa has had trouble with expressing what it is she wants in the past, usually defaulting to whatever she thinks will make me the happiest. Hearing her take back some of her autonomy without worrying it will drive me away is… relieving. Thrilling. There is nothing more precious to me than the idea of my Vespa being at peace with herself and her wants and needs, even if only in this moment, “What’s that?”

Vespa stays quiet for a moment longer. Our hands, intertwined on the dark sheets between us, squeeze each other. Her shoulder brushes mine.

“Back then,” Vespa says. “Back… before all of this happened. There was one other thing you used to like.”

I think I hear a smile in her voice, and it’s confirmed when she chuckles a little, to herself, before continuing.

“I don’t know if you remember. You used to get me to give you shoulder massages, all the time.”

I laugh before I can quite help myself, “Oh, I remember. I could hardly forget how well you used to knead the tension out of me. With fingers that skilled, it’s no wonder I fell in love with you so fast.”

She snorts and nudges me with her shoulder. “Wanna find out if I’ve still got it?”

I close my eyes and breathe out, “I’d love *nothing* more.”

Vespa shifts around on the bed so that she’s up on her knees just behind me. Her hands tug at the hem of my shirt, and I adjust so that she can pull it up and over my head. I half expect her to throw it across the floor, but after a moment, I hear rustling, and I twist around to see that she’s put it on.

“Thief,” I accuse, and she leans down over me to steal an upside-down kiss.

“Keeping it warm,” she argues.

It’s a good argument. Especially when every second she has it on will make the shirt smell of her when I get it back. Double especially when she makes it look so good.

Then she sets her hands on my shoulders, and says, “Now stop squirming,” and, a little teasingly, she adds, “Doctor’s orders.”

For the sake of dignity, I refuse to comment on the way her stupid joke makes me feel, but it shows enough to make her laugh at me anyway and lean down to press a kiss to the side of my face. Then she leans back up, and begins to massage me.

Time hasn’t changed the way Vespa touches me; if anything it’s turned her hands more tender than ever before. Or perhaps it’s simply that I’ve had years of built up stress and tension with no deft slender hands to work it all away. Whatever the cause, Vespa finds every tense spot in my muscles and teases it out with gentle and expert care. Her fingers press lightly on my neck as she massages the tight spots there, and when she moves her fingers back to my shoulders she replaces them with her lips in a soft kiss.

“Oh, love,” I breathe out. “You’re too good to me.”

“Shut up,” Vespa mutters, her voice soft and amused, and she kisses me again, “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

She moves her lips to the nape of my neck, and then the top of my head as she continues her heavenly assault against my knotted muscles until I’m soft and sighing and fully relaxed.

“Better?” she mumbles.

“So much,” I tip my head back and she obliges me with a short peck on the lips. “I don’t know how I’ll ever thank you, good doctor.”

She laughs at that, and sits back on her heels. I twist around to look at her and get stuck there.

I can count on my hand the times I’ve seen Vespa Ilkay smile like this since we reunited with each other at last. She looks… happy. Calm for a moment in a world that brings her so much torment. My heart swells. To be able to bring someone as beautiful as this woman,

someone so strong and so brave, who I am utterly devoted to with every cell of my body, a moment of happiness, is all that I could ever want from my life.

The weight of that devotion seems to land on her. Her smile waves for a moment, and she shakes her head suddenly — once, twice.

I crawl up on the bed to meet her, “Are you alright, love?”

Vespa reaches out for me and wraps her arms around me wordlessly. I return the favour best I can and hold her close to my chest, shuffling the two of us back until we’re sitting in the pillows with our backs to the headboard.

“I’m okay,” she says quietly. “Just… hard to believe this is real sometimes.”

I turn my head into her hair and squeeze her, “I know. I know. But it is, love. I’m here. And I love you more with every passing moment.”

“I know,” Vespa mutters, “Me too.”

A moment’s more quiet cuddling has me decide to pull the blankets over the two of us. Vespa is still wearing my shirt, and I’m still without one, but I couldn’t care less with her in my arms against me.

“I want to watch that movie with you,” Vespa croaks out against my neck. “It’s hard. It reminds me of all the future we used to think we had together. All that time we lost—”

“Shh, shh, Vespa,” I cut her off, perhaps a little unkindly but I can’t stand to hear her say things like that. “Love. We are so lucky to have this time together now. We have so much future left. And I plan on living it all out by your side, for as long as you can still bear to have me.”

Vespa laughs, “Like I’d ever get sick of you.” She tips her head back and I press her lips to mine. We kiss under the covers, clutching each other tightly and barely even parting for air. When our breath runs out, she lies on my chest and I press kisses into her hair.

“Thanks, Bud,” Vespa says quietly. “I know it’s hard sometimes. It’s hard for me, too.”

“I know, love. It’s alright. You’re more than worth a little hardship to me. We’re getting through it together.”

She kisses my chest one last time, then leans her head back to kiss underneath my jaw. “I want to fall asleep like this,” she says, “Every night for the rest of my life.”

I smile and pull her closer in to me. “In that case, love, I’ll do everything in my power to make sure it happens.”

Chapter End Notes

2nd last chance to comment so make it count!! :P

Peter & Juno: Love at its Messiest.

Chapter Summary

In which two people are learning to fall in love.

Chapter Notes

i can't believe it's over!!! it's been such a journey since december last year and i'm honestly gonna miss it. but i'll leave the sappy shit to the end note, make sure you read it bc its got cool stuff in there.

art for this final chapter by wolfy!

and remember folks, as juno steel would proudly say: ACAB!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Look, I don't really mean for it to happen.

There are a few excuses I could use – that there's just a detective instinct in my blood that I'll never be able to outrun? But that sounds a little to close to a line of thinking I've been trying to shed for a long time now for my liking.

If I'm honest with myself, and look, alright, I rarely am, but I'm working on it… I'm just curious. …And have a habit for being nosey, especially in places I haven't been invited into. But it's *different* when it's your partner.

He's busy enough, alright? He doesn't have the time to put up with me being clingy. So it just kind of becomes an idle habit to look for ways to be together even when we're apart, to learn more about him without him having to spend time and energy telling me. It can happen before I've really even acknowledged I've doing it.

All of this is to say that really, I'm just as surprised as he is when he finds me in his room.

I glance up when the door opens and he walks in, an exhausted sigh halfway out of him before his eyes light on me and he immediately straightens the tired slump in his back, "Juno!"

"Uh, hey," my smile comes out a little shyer than I really want, and I

shuffle myself so I'm sitting up against the headboard of his bed, "Sorry. I didn't mean to let myself in. I just, uh…" The words *missed you* build in my throat, but they die there.

By the way the sharp lines of his pose softens, I think he knows what I mean anyway.

Okay, I'll be honest. There was a part of me that thought it would kind of be cute, him finding me here waiting when he came back from the market-trip down on Lilongwe XII. Whoever says Juno Steel isn't a romantic, well… is probably right, but a lady's gotta start somewhere, okay?

Now, though, there's a twinge of guilt in me. He's clearly about to fall over where he stands – he can't even bother to hide the tiredness on his face when he smiles at me. I'm sure all he wants is a chance to be alone and let his guard completely down.

Nureyev walks over and brushes a hand over the side of my face. His hands are so soft. I lean into his touch, closing my eye and nuzzling into it, and then then lean my head back so he can lean down and give me a soft kiss. I can't stop the way I smile into it, and it doesn't help when I feel him smile back.

He sits down beside me when he pulls back. "It was only two days," he chides.

"Don't make fun of me, I—"

"I wasn't! I was talking to both of us. I missed you, too, Juno," he says, and winks at me.

This man…

Peter leans down to undo the laces of his heeled boots. "There was this wonderful place down there that reminded me very much of somewhere I'd like to take you. If we didn't have to move on from this planet, I would've offered you dinner there tonight."

I sigh and shuffle so that I can wrap my arms around his waist from behind, my chin digging into his shoulder, "I would've said no anyway. I'm not really the fancy dinner type, and you need a break."

"I'm perfectly—"

"You look *wrecked,* Nureyev. No offence."

He snorts and sets his shoes aside, “As usual, Juno, your tact is overwhelming.”

“Okay, look, it’s different when you’re in a relationship. If you really cared about me, you’d tell me when I looked like a train-wreck waiting to happen, too.”

“So *that’s* what I look like to you?” but his voice is fond, and he twists in my arms to kiss me again, “You know, I—”

His eyes flicker only a millimetre away from mine, but they lock on to something, and he goes tense. The only word in my mind is *oops*. His mouth is still open in the middle of a word, and then he moves all at once.

His body uncoils like a wound-up toy from my arms, and he crawls over the bed to close his hands over the corner of something green that’s been stuffed hastily under a pillow.

Caught red-handed. I sit on the bed with my hands in my lap, and try very quickly to come up with what my excuse is about to be. An age old prickle starts humming at the back of my consciousness *gone too far you’ve gone too far he’ll hit you for this you’ve gone too far.* I look at my fingers, close my eyes and watch the thought pass me by. Remember he’s not like that and that I wouldn’t deserve it if he was. Open my eyes.

Nureyev isn’t even looking at me. He’s sitting back on his knees, brushing his long fingers over the cover, “Where did you get this?”

I get it. Books are rare things to own. And by the look of that one, its flaking cover and its alluring smell and yellowed pages, it’s hardly new. Probably irreplaceable, the last of its kind. Not the kind of thing you want your boyfriend’s sticky fingers all over.

“I… I was looking for something of yours to wear, you know that scarf I really like?” He nods shallowly, not taking his eyes away. I’m not sure if I should reach for him or not, “I, uh… saw the bag you keep at the back of your cupboard? And, well… you don’t own many personal things like that, which means the ones that you do are super special, and I just…”

“Couldn’t help yourself?” Nureyev turns to raise an eyebrow at me. He looks down his nose in a way that’s not *exactly* accusing, but a near thing.

“I’m sorry.”

“Were you reading it?” Nureyev asks. He shifts around so he’s sitting, cross-legged, on the bed, the book in his lap.

I try to evaluate his expression. It looks more curious now than horrified, and there’s a bit of the sparkle to his eyes I’ve learned to associate with the way he obsesses over every piece of boring trivia like it’s the most interesting thing he’s ever learned, so I feel like I’ve probably gotten off the hook for being the world’s meddlesome datemate.

“Yeah,” I admit. “It’s… a children’s book?”

Nureyev’s face flashes hurt for a moment, but before I can correct my mistake, he laughs softly and traces the cover again, “I suppose you’re right. It’s how I learnt how to read Sol.”

Oh. *Oh.* Suddenly it makes sense – the way he’s caressing the book like an old, treasured friend. I can almost see him: fourteen-year-old Peter Nureyev with the bowl cut he hated having but Mag insisted on, and hand-me-down glasses that were two frame sizes too big, and clothes that could never fit both length-wise and width-wise.

It makes me more uncomfortable than I’d probably ever admit, that I can remember moments from his life like that. The Peter Nureyev I’d seen in his head, after all, had had long hair in a ponytail and a crisp suit and sharp glasses that suited his face. I’ve never seen him any other way – and yet I’m certain they’re things he’s experienced, facts about him I somehow know.

I know he’d argued with Mag for days until he’d agreed to let him grow his hair out. I know when it finally got long enough he spent hours staring at himself in the mirror and putting little braids in is hair in as many places as he could. I know he’d cut his ponytail off with shaking hands on his knees in a public bathroom with the smell of blood still raw in his nose.

I know, suddenly, that he returned to Brahma only once. It was to ransack the old safehouse and see if any of the memories buried in there were worth the pain of keeping. This book is the only keepsake he took with him when he left again.

Back in the world outside of my thoughts, Nureyev looks up at me and our eyes meet. I don’t know if he reads it on my face – a question seems to land in the twitch of his eyebrows before it flitters away

again and all he says is, “It means a lot to me.”

“I know,” I chew on my lip for a bit, and then grimace and admit, “I, uh… can remember.”

“Yes, I gathered,” I know it makes Nureyev uncomfortable when I remember things about him like that, but he’s learnt to hide the discomfort from me – from himself, too, probably. I want to say something. There’s a second of tension.

Then it’s broken with the flash of a quick, sharp smile and shining eyes, “Where are you up to?”

I stare at him for a moment. Then “Oh! The—the book. I didn’t get too far. I think the dog had just stolen the shadow...?”

“Oh, *Nana*!” Nureyev says, with the same kind of voice you reserve for suddenly recognising old friends ten years after you last saw them, “What do you think?”

“Of… what?”

“Nana!”

“The dog?”

“Yes, well—well she’s more than a *dog*,” Nureyev opens the book in his lap and leafs through some pages, “She looks after the Darling kids. Don’t you think it’s wonderfully imaginative? The idea of stealing someone’s shadow? When I was a boy I used to—well, it sounds a little embarrassing now, but… I used to pretend my shadow was a friend of mine.”

He glances over at me. His hair falls around his face. His smile puts dimples into his cheeks and his eyes are crinkled. He looks entirely transformed by his excitement, and something else, too, though I can’t quite pick it. He’s only been gone two days, but maybe he changed his skin routine slightly or picked up a new product I haven’t noticed yet, “This was always my favourite bit. When he tries to get the shadow back.”

I’ve been trying my hardest to keep up, but I have to ask, “Who?”

“Well, P—” Nureyev cuts himself off suddenly, and he goes bright red in that way he does when he’s honestly embarrassed, underneath all of his layers. “You know, you probably don’t care about this at all. It’s

just a *children's book* after all, and hardly a realistic one at that."

"No! It's important to you – that makes it important to me," I shuffle a little closer on the bed and trace my hand over his own over the open page of the book, "I picked it up because I wanted to find out what kinds of books you read, and why. Cause I *want* to know what's important to you. Tell me more."

Nureyev glances at me again. Then he twists his hand so its upright and our fingers are entwined. "Thank you," he murmurs, and lays his head against my shoulder.

"Go on, then. Tell me what happens next."

"I don't want to spoil it," Nureyev leans up and pouts at me.

"I probably wouldn't have time to read it anyway," I offer, and I squeeze his hand in mine, "Anyway, I want to hear it from you."

"Well," Nureyev says, and sits up properly, "When the Darlings go to bed that night, that's when Peter sneaks in."

Something catches in my chest. I can't help but smile, "*Oh.* I think I get your obsession with this book now."

"I was a *child*, Juno."

"A child who got to share his name with one of his heroes?"

Nureyev shrugs a shoulder. The colour was just fading from his face, but it's back again. I lean over and kiss it and lean back, "Hey, don't worry. If Juno hadn't turned out to be a piece of work I probably would've been obsessed with her mythology, too."

"Mag stole it for me just because…" Nureyev mutters, his voice very quiet, "Sometimes, he'd… call me Pan, and I'd call him Hook. We had this game we used to play—" His voice stutters and stops in his throat.

I wait a moment to see if he can continue, but it seems he's run out of words for now and so I lean my head back on his shoulder again and squeeze his hand tight. He nuzzles his head into my hair.

We hold each other like that for a moment, and then Nureyev breathes in deeply against my hair, squeezes my hand again, and leans back away.

He readjusts his glasses with his free hand and breathes, "Well. Peter

chases his shadow around the room until Wendy catches it for him and sews it back on. Peter explains he's from Neverland, which is this place where children never have to grow up, and where he looks after all the other Lost Boys, who are orphans… just like him."

"You see, all Peter's ever wanted is some company," Nureyev explains in a soft voice. "So he convinces Wendy, who's really rather infatuated with him, you see, to come with him to Neverland. It varies across translations as to whether they're involved romantically or not. I don't think they were in the original; in this version I believe it's implied but never confirmed. Either way, you see, Peter has this idea they'll never grow up together, that they'll spend their lives travelling around this magical world and visiting mermaids and outwitting pirates and seeing everything there is to see."

I can imagine it. No, more than that – I can remember it. Young Peter Nureyev, lying on his back and staring up at the stars, imagining his Wendy out there waiting for him, somewhere. Waiting to be swept away to a life of extravagance and travel and *never growing up*.

"It's not to be, of course," Nureyev continues. The index finger of his free hand idly caresses the page open in front of him. "Wendy can't stay. She feels indebted to the world she came from, to her brothers, and she simply can't live in a fantasy like Peter can. And anyway, she begins to sense whatever semblance of a relationship she hopes to have with him could never work out."

I can't take my eyes off of him. His eyes are cast downwards at the page and there's a small smile on his face – I don't think he knows, I realise, what the story he's telling mirrors.

"He checks in on her every now and then, but… It's difficult, seeing that she's growing up without him. It makes him feel very naïve."

"Sounds like a sad story," I say.

"Oh, no, there's much more to it than that," I wait for it – the deep meaning he's about to pull out, the surprise happy ending. After a moment's pause, he looks at me like I've missed my cue and explains, "You know, like Hook and Tinkerbell for a start, and Tiger Lily and Michael and John, and the Lost Boys."

I laugh and lean against him again, "How often have you read this book?"

Nureyev lets out a heavy sigh, "I wouldn't even know. Hundreds of

times, I'd think."

"You remind me of him," I tell him. "Peter Pan."

Nureyev doesn't say anything for a while. Maybe the associations of all that are too much, and Peter Pan isn't the kind of person he wants to be like anymore. I open my mouth to tell him I didn't mean it, and at the same time he turns his face to me and kisses me.

It takes me by surprise, but I manage to recover. He kisses me for a long time, open-mouthed but soft. Our hands squeeze each other. Our lips linger for a moment as he pulls away, and then he says, "I don't think I'm anything like him, anymore. But thank you."

Nureyev leaves me on the bed to go finish getting changed into his nightclothes and go put on his moisturiser. When he comes back, I've tucked myself into his blankets, and I'm reading.

Nureyev laughs softly when he sees me, "I suppose you intend to stay the night, then?"

"I can go if you need me to," I tell him, but Nureyev is already shaking his head. I turn on the bedside lamp, and he switches off the main light and crawls into bed beside me.

"Nureyev," I say.

"Mm?"

"I guess… Pan probably isn't the best pet-name for me to use for you, huh? Too many feelings about it?"

He goes still beside me for a long time. A glance at him proves that he's calculating, examining himself and finding the answer to my question. After a while, he says, "I… think you're right."

"How… do you feel about me calling you my lost boy, then?" I feel embarrassed before I even finish the question, and more words bubble out of me on reflex, "I just—want to have something that feels right for you—us. Just for us, our own thing."

Nureyev smiles and his eyes crinkle. He leans over and kisses my cheek, "I don't know if I qualify as a *boy* anymore. I'm getting old, you know."

And then it hits me – what looked so different about him before. It

wasn't that he'd changed in the two days away, it was that he changes when he talks about the things he loves. He looks so bright eyed, and enthusiastic, and so *young*.

So I laugh, a little bit, and I lean forward to kiss him again. "Nureyev," I tell him, and kiss him again, "I don't think you'll ever grow up. I think there's going to be a part of Neverland in you forever."

"You think so?"

"You kept the book, didn't you?"

Nureyev thinks on that for a moment, and then he smiles, "I suppose I did." He glances at the book in my hands, "Where are you up to now?"

I sit back and look at the book in my hands, scouring for my place, "I was just at… uh… 'He is sure to come back for it; let us put it where he can get it easily without disturbing the children'."

"This is exactly what I was talking about! I love the way they treat having caught someone's shadow as though it happens every day. That kind of magical realism just captures the imagination, don't you think?" Nureyev shuffles over to read over my shoulder, his whole body pressed up against mine. "Keep going."

"You—want me to read to you?"

"This is the best bit," Nureyev says by way of answer.

I haven't… read aloud in a long time. I can't remember the last time I did, but I know who it was for. Is it stupid that there's a part of me who wants to leave it as something I did only for him? Is it stupid I feel like I'm betraying him if I read out loud for someone else? My throat is tight.

"…Unless, of course, you don't want to," Nureyev says warily. I glance at him and he's looking back at me, worried. "Juno…"

"It's alright," I say. My voice comes out scratched.

It's not betrayal to read for someone else. Maybe, in a way, it's more like betrayal to lock away everything that reminds me of Benzaiten, to swear never to do anything that makes me think of him again. My brother doesn't deserve to be locked away.

So I grab a pillow and put it behind my back, and I clear my throat, and I read, “But unfortunately Mrs. Darling could not leave it hanging out the window, it looked so like the washing and lowered the whole tone of the house.”

Nureyev rests his head on my shoulder and puts an arm over my stomach.

“She thought of showing it to Mr. Darling, but he was totting up the winter great-coats for John and Michael, with a wet towel around his head to keep his brain clear, and it seemed a shame to trouble him; besides, she knew exactly what he would say: ‘It all comes of having a dog for a nurse.’”

He chuckles against my shoulder, and then yawns, “You have a beautiful reading voice.”

“Yeah, I—” I lose my place on the page and have to struggle to find it again, “Uh… Benzaiten used to think so, too.”

And I keep reading. I don’t know how long I read for, the book takes all kinds of strange journeys and weird tangents, and apart from piping up to interject with some sorts of random trivia about how a particular part was written and in reference to what, or where he was when he read this part for the first time, Nureyev stays quiet.

I don’t know how long passes until I read the words, “A moment after the fairy’s entrance the window was blown open by the breathing of the little stars, and Peter dropped in.” Then I stop, and turn to look at him, “This is your favourite part, right?”

Nureyev’s asleep. His head is still on my shoulder, but his eyes are shut, still rimmed with dark bags. His eyelids twitch. I sigh and close the book.

I lean over and kiss his forehead, and then I have to shift him off of me so I can sit up, put the book away, and turn off the light. He stirs, and nestles properly into the blankets.

When I’m confident that the book is placed somewhere on the nightstand it doesn’t risk getting something spilled on it or of falling off and the spine breaking, I nestle into the blankets beside him.

I lean over and kiss his cheek, “Night, lost boy.”

In his half-asleep state, Peter smiles, and says, “G’night, Wendy.”

[image]

I wait until I'm sure he's asleep.

I test it, eventually. I brush my hand over the side of his face, and whisper, "Nureyev?"

He snores quietly and ignores me. His face is barely visible in the darkness.

I try again, "Honey? Are you awake?"

Nothing.

Still, my throat is tight. I try to speak one last time, and it squeezes until all that comes out is a soft whimper.

I close my eyes. I feel Nureyev's face under my hand, listen to the sound of him breathing. It comes to me easily — the feeling that scares the shit out of me on a good day and leaves me overwhelmed beyond speech. I want to wake up every morning to this man.

He's still asleep. I swallow down my anxiety.

"Nureyev."

No answer. And so I practice saying what I can't say to his face.

"I love you."

My heart beats like the thump of a sewer-rabbit's tail when you scratch one right under the chin. I don't think he's heard. I wait in suspense anyway — wait for the veil to be lifted, the rug to be pulled, the final sign from the universe that *in love* is something Juno Steel doesn't get to be.

But nothing happens, after a while. And when I relax into the blankets again, and shift into a more comfortable position, Nureyev only stirs to pull himself closer to me.

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap!!

I'd like to once again give a huge thank you to the mods & artists during this time. You can find the artists from this fic at these places:

Wolfy: https://awalkingparadox11.tumblr.com/
https://twitter.com/wolfythewitch?lang=en

Sarcasm: https://cosmic-kitty-art.tumblr.com/

And I'd like to extend a HUGE thank you to EVERYBODY who commented, left kudos, or bookmarked this fic. This was my first fandom event and the first long fic I've ever actually entirely finished, lol. All of your comments genuinely meant so much and made the stress & late nights worth it :').

If you'd like to, comment below & let me know which of these were your favourite chapters! Or feel free to tell me more about some of Your favourite character dynamic headcanons and comment on other people's. I think that'd be neat.

Finally, I'm going to take a break from any serious writing for a While after this, but I do have some long-form fic ideas I've been sitting on for a long time. I'd love your input, so I set up a poll on Twitter where you can let me know which one of those ideas people are excited about!! https://twitter.com/onetiredb0y/status/1267087583596572677?s=20

Now that I've stopped being stressed about posting, I can't wait to read everybody else's fics. So I'm off to go do that!

Thank you all once again!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!